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**Logic and the Basis of Ethics: A critical evaluation with
respect to the Naturalistic Fallacy**

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Abstract

Arthur Prior (1914-1969) was a New Zealand philosopher who worked primarily on Logic and is often referred to as the father of tense logic. In 1949, while lecturing at Canterbury University in Christchurch, New Zealand, Prior published *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, in which he developed a historical background of the 'issue' as he called it of describing character and conduct by using ethical predicates. Prior believed that when one attempts to describe character and conduct using terms such as 'good' and 'bad' one will likely resort to giving a definition of those terms to support their use in a situation, and then one will be guilty of fallacious reasoning since those terms are indefinable. Prior makes reference to almost fifty philosophers and others over the course of about one hundred pages, but spends more time on G. E. Moore and Ralph Cudworth than many of the others he covers. In this thesis I will critically evaluate Prior's arguments in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, in particular those that relate to Moore, Cudworth, and the naturalistic fallacy. There is a long-standing debate about the naturalistic fallacy because while some argue that it is obviously a fallacy, others argue that it is not a fallacy at all, thus the aim in this thesis will be to consider whether Prior's arguments regarding the naturalistic fallacy are confused and to illustrate the nature of the scholarly controversy.

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Introduction

The issue is, roughly, this: We all sometimes describe conduct and character (and perhaps other things; but we shall not here be concerned with other things) as 'good' or 'bad', or as 'right' or 'wrong'. Some hold that there is nothing out of the ordinary about what these words refer to – that they either merely express the feelings of the person using them or refer to some 'natural' characteristic of the objects to which they are applied, such as their conduciveness or otherwise to survival...Others hold that ethical predicates – words like 'good' and 'evil', 'right' and 'wrong' – represent qualities which are *sui generis*, in a category on their own, different from all 'natural' qualities.¹

We do indeed describe conduct and character by using ethical predicates such as 'good' and 'evil,' 'right' and 'wrong.' Most would agree with the claim that Mother Teresa was a good person, while Hitler was evil. And many would surely support the assertion that in most cases lying is wrong, while telling the truth is right. But what exactly does it mean to call someone or something 'good' or 'bad,' 'right' or 'wrong'? How does one go about defining such ethical terms? It is suggested above, and it is the central theme of a branch of philosophy called *naturalism*, that by calling someone or something good, one might merely be expressing a feeling, or referring to a *natural* characteristic that the person or thing possesses. However, these options seem lacking. When one asserts that Mother Teresa was a *good* person one is neither simply expressing a subjective feeling, nor is one merely referring to a single natural property she may have possessed. These two options are insufficient and do not convey all that the term 'good' entails. Similarly, when one calls Hitler evil, one is using an ethical term to sum-up a myriad of negative beliefs and claims about both his conduct and his character. By using the terms 'good' and 'evil' one is not merely suggesting one thing or another. The terms are used to imply a multitude of concepts and ideas. Ethical predicates are simple terms used to convey complex messages.

¹ Prior, A. N. (1949) *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. vii

We all know how to use these terms in everyday language and how they may be applied to maintain a distinction between a behaviour and character. When a child acts in a naughty manner we might say that the child has been bad, while intending to convey the meaning that the child has temporarily behaved badly, but that the character of the child is good. For us to be able to employ such a difference – the difference between good and bad in regard to conduct and character – in day-to-day language suggests that ethical terms are not merely names used to refer to the feelings of the one using them. Furthermore, given that one can be of a good character, and yet act badly, ethical predicates do not seem to simply refer to a characteristic someone or something possesses. The other option suggested in the quote above, and belonging to the *non-naturalist* doctrine, is that ethical terms might represent qualities unlike any others and that these qualities are in a category of their own. While at first glance this option may look preferable one must consider what sort of qualities would be so different from all others that they would be in their own category. So, the question remains, how ought one to define ethical predicates – and in particular how ought one to define ‘good’?

This is a thesis that examines a discussion that was popular in the middle of the last century. It became popular because so many philosophers had tried their luck at adopting one of the options given in the quote above in order to prove, essentially, that words like ‘good’ either refer to a natural property, or they do not. One philosopher gave a historical account of the naturalist/non-naturalist debate, examining arguments ranging from the seventeenth century to modern twentieth century theories. That philosopher was New Zealander, Arthur Prior (1914-1969). Prior was a noted logician and is often referred to as the father of tense logic.

Prior’s most significant achievement was the invention and development of tense logic. Tense logic involves two new modal operators, ‘It will be the case that’ and ‘It has been the case that’. Prior used his tense logic to articulate theories about the structure and metaphysics of time, and to mount a robust defence of freewill and indeterminism.²

² Copeland, B. J. (2007) ‘Arthur Prior,’ from *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Although Prior was primarily focussed on Logic he also published papers on Ethics, in particular on the subject of the logic of ethics. One of his more substantive Ethics publications is *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (1949); it is in this book that Prior develops a historical background of the 'issue,' as he calls it, of describing character and conduct by using ethical predicates. The book itself is written in such a way that it is extremely difficult to untangle the arguments within it. Prior makes reference to almost fifty philosophers and others over the course of about one hundred pages. So one often feels at times that arguments have been rushed or thrown in with too little explanation, and this is an uncomfortable feeling for a first time reader – unfortunately the discomfort does not let up on one's subsequent readings either.

One of the most challenging tasks when reading *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* is to be able to discover what it is Prior is actually arguing or at least what exactly he wants us to take away from the book. He states in the introduction that it is not his intention to settle the naturalist/non-naturalist debate, though does tell us that he is a non-naturalist. However, throughout the book he does not really develop his own argument as to why the non-naturalist's way of thinking is the correct route to follow. By declaring himself a non-naturalist from the beginning he left himself open to the criticism that he must have had a reason for choosing this side and it seems odd that he would not give an explanation or argument behind that reasoning. From this one can only assume that the point of the book was not really to persuade us one way or the other but to present the facts in a historical context. This is well and good, but throughout the chapters what is presented seems to attack naturalism more so than it does non-naturalism. The first chapter is an account of one of the better-known criticisms of naturalism, the *naturalistic fallacy*, and it is the discussion of this fallacy that sets the tone for the rest of the book.

The naturalistic fallacy is famously described by the twentieth century philosopher G. E. Moore in his 1902 work *Principia Ethica* and is essentially the theory that because the ethical term 'good' is said to be indefinable any attempt by naturalists (or others for that matter) to define 'good' will result in committing this fallacy. It is argued by some that the naturalistic fallacy occurs because those who attempt to define 'good' do so in *natural* terms such as 'pleasant' or 'desired,' and because the term 'good' is *ethical* and not natural these attempts fail. Others argue that the naturalistic fallacy occurs through

trying to deduce ethical propositions from a set of non-ethical premises, which is similar, but not the same, as attempting to define an ethical word in natural terms. The nature of the naturalistic fallacy has been the subject of much debate because on the one hand there are those who claim that it is obviously a fallacy (sometimes for different reasons), and on the other hand there are those who argue it is not a fallacy at all.

Regarding fallacies Prior claims:

The exposure of fallacious ethical arguments is...a task which it seems to be necessary to perform anew in every age. It is something like housekeeping, or lawnmowing, or shaving. [But even] when we know beforehand that some system must be fallacious – that what it sets out to do, simply cannot be done – we learn something in the effort to discover just where the fallacy lies.³

Over the course of the nine studies in the book Prior accuses naturalists and non-naturalists alike of committing not only the naturalistic fallacy but also other fallacies, which he says are “not unlike” it. Despite spending much of his time making accusations with regard to fallacies and despite the thrust of the quotation above one of the points that I will highlight throughout my study is that Prior himself does not give an adequate explanation of how the fallacies he mentions work and how they differ from each other.

Prior makes an interesting reference to Aristotle in his introduction, the purpose of which may have been to hint at what his overall aim was:

[T]his particular controversy has a special interest for the logician, for the following reason: Aristotle divides the possible subjects of inquiry and dispute into three broad sorts – ‘natural’, ‘ethical’, and ‘logical’.⁴ Ethical naturalism may be broadly described as the view that ‘ethical’ propositions and inquiries are in the end just a sub-species of ‘natural’ ones. But we shall find that both those who assert this and those who deny it frequently end up by identifying ethical propositions with logical ones. And this of course, imposes upon the logician the responsibility of showing that it is not possible to solve the difficulties of either side in this way.⁵

³ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, pp. x-xi

⁴ The passage to which Prior makes reference is *Topics*, 105b19-29. Prior himself does not give the passage. I will discuss this further in part three of this thesis.

⁵ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. viii

More specifically, Prior's aim was to show us that "purely logical considerations" cannot settle the naturalist/non-naturalist debate since it is a mistake to identify ethical propositions and enquires with natural or logical ones. The purpose of Prior's reference to Aristotle may have simply been to indicate that there are three distinct categories of enquiry and that one ought to keep this in mind when considering the naturalist/non-naturalist debate. It may have also been to caution us about falling into fallacious reasoning, which he believed philosophers do fall into when they attempt to settle ethical issues by purely logical considerations. So Prior as we shall see is especially concerned to emphasise a separation between Ethics and Logic.

As we saw above Prior thinks of exposing fallacious arguments as something that must be done in every age. It is as tedious a need as it is to mow lawns or shave. I think this shows very much so that his aim is to make us aware that fallacies happen, they happen in every century and we all need to be aware of the tendency to fall into such traps. He seems to think that we need to be vigilant in our development of arguments so as not to lead ourselves down the path to the naturalistic fallacy, or fallacies like it. However, a number of philosophers do not find Prior's own arguments in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* convincing. One of the aims in this thesis will be to consider whether Prior's arguments are flawed, or inconsistent, and to illustrate the nature of the scholarly controversy.

In a review of Prior's book, W. K. Frankena commends Prior's discussion of the naturalist/non-naturalist debate, but counters it with the criticism that "it is hard to see just what it adds up to, or how it is related to his treatment of the naturalistic fallacy."⁶ Charner Perry also gives a similar criticism in his review stating that

...his [Prior's] doctrines, despite their apparent clarity and plausibility, do not constitute a clear and adequate solution of the problems with which he deals. They evidently involve assumptions and distinctions which are not recognized or examined, they raise a number of difficult questions about logic, ethics, and the relation between the two, and

⁶ Frankena, W. K. '[Untitled] Reviewed work(s): *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*,' in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 59, No. 4. (Oct., 1950), p.555

apparently solving problems which are not sufficiently analysed they confuse rather than clarify the issues.⁷

This quote is a fine summation of the problem with *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* but it is this very problem, the lack of clarity, which has made an analysis of it so challenging and so worthwhile. Prior made a contribution to philosophy both in *Logic and Ethics*, and my purpose is to offer a critical evaluation of *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* so that we may come to better understand the precise nature of Prior's contribution. In this thesis I have one over-arching aim, and that is to give a critical evaluation of Prior's arguments with respect to the naturalistic fallacy. If, as some of Prior's critics insist, the naturalistic fallacy is not in fact a fallacy, then it becomes crucially important to examine this part of Prior's claim.

One of the downfalls in the book is that Prior makes reference to far too many theories in the small amount of space (approximately 100 pages) he allows himself. I do not want to make the same mistake, so in order to give a clear and concise account of Prior's arguments I have chosen to limit my study to Prior's treatment of G. E. Moore and Ralph Cudworth. Of the many philosophers' theories he canvasses Prior spends more time on a certain few. Moore and Cudworth are among the ones to whom he devotes lengthy discussions, so it makes sense to analyse whether Prior's arguments regarding them were fair, and then examine how those arguments relate to the naturalistic fallacy.

This thesis, then, will be divided into four parts:

1. Part one will involve a close textual analysis of G. E. Moore's arguments concerning the term 'good,' found primarily in his *Principia Ethica*, followed by Prior's account and criticisms of Moore's theory.
2. Part two will involve a close textual analysis of Ralph Cudworth's *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*. In this part it will become apparent how Moore and Cudworth's arguments differ. There will also be a discussion of the way in which Prior criticised both Moore and Cudworth's

⁷ Perry, C. '[Untitled] Reviewed work(s): *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*,' in *Ethics*, Vol. 62, No. 1. (Oct., 1951), p. 71

arguments and why he accused them of arguing in the same way despite their seemingly different arguments.

3. Part three will be primarily concerned with Prior's own arguments regarding the naturalistic fallacy and its consequences. This part will also involve a detailed discussion of the structure of selected fallacies drawing on W. K. Frankena's article 'The Naturalistic Fallacy.'
4. Part four will be a culmination of the information accumulated throughout the previous sections and will involve a close textual study of Prior's arguments in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* specifically regarding Moore and Cudworth.

There are serious questions to consider about Prior's interpretation of Moore and Cudworth. And there is a long-standing debate about his analysis of the naturalistic fallacy. In this thesis I look at each in turn with the purpose not to resolve the naturalist/non-naturalist debate, (though it will serve as a rebuttal to the non-naturalist's claim that so many commit the naturalistic fallacy) but to analyse the arguments found within Prior's book. This thesis will be constructed with the intent to show that while Prior may have been correct to caution that purely logical considerations cannot settle the naturalist/non-natural debate, his arguments in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* against philosophers such as Moore and Cudworth regarding fallacies, especially the naturalistic fallacy, may be confused and perhaps even flawed.⁸

⁸ In this thesis the paths that Prior believed led to committing the naturalistic fallacy will be outlined. One of these paths is through deducing ethical propositions from non-ethical premises. I will not go into detail here but must make note that in a later article 'The Autonomy of Ethics,' in *Papers on Logic*, Prior retracts his claim that this leads to committing the naturalistic fallacy. Although this is an important point it only strengthens my claim that Prior's arguments regarding the naturalistic fallacy in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* seem somewhat confused.

Part One

G. E. Moore

1.1 The Indefinability of 'Good'

(i) It is an enquiry to which most special attention should be directed since this question, how 'good' is to be defined, is the most fundamental question in all Ethics. (ii) That which is meant by 'good' is, in fact, except its converse 'bad,' the *only* simple object of thought which is peculiar to Ethics. (iii) Its definition is, therefore, the most essential point in the definition of Ethics; and moreover a mistake with regard to it entails a far larger number of erroneous ethical judgments than any other. (iv) Unless this first question be fully understood, and its true answer clearly recognised, the rest of Ethics is as good as useless from the point of view of systematic knowledge.⁹

G. E. Moore famously argues in this passage, from *Principia Ethica*, that (i) the question of how the term 'good' is to be defined is the most fundamental question in Ethics. However, giving a definition of 'good' is no simple task because, as Moore says, (ii) 'good' and 'bad' are simple objects of thought. According to Moore (iii) a mistake in attempting to define such terms as 'good' and 'bad' can lead to errors in ethical judgments. And what Moore means at (iv) is that the definition of 'good' is tricky and getting it wrong and not understanding it undermines many ethical discussions. However, as we will soon see, Moore not only claimed that defining 'good' is difficult but he also claimed it was in some senses impossible.¹⁰

His first approach to the problem of defining 'good' is linguistic. Within this approach Moore considers the questions 'What is a definition?' and 'What can a definition do?' He begins to answer these questions at §6 where he gives a discussion about how to

⁹ Moore, G. E. (1966) *Principia Ethica*, (first published in 1903), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, §5 p. 5

¹⁰ I would like to acknowledge here that this part contains a large amount of literature that in itself could be the basis of a detailed study. My approach is to isolate the particular features of Moore's work that Prior includes in his own case. My study will centre on the areas of Moore's (and later Cudworth's) philosophy that are at work in Prior's interpretation of the naturalistic fallacy. It must be kept in mind that the focus of this thesis is Prior, and the studies of Moore and Cudworth are necessary preliminaries to the analysis of Prior's arguments.

define 'good,' and in particular what *sort* of definition is required. He explains that a definition of a word may be given by way of using other terms to express the word's meaning. An example of this sort of definition can be seen in §7 where he shows that the word 'horse' can be defined by using other terms to express what is *meant* when one uses the word 'horse.' Moore argues that the word 'horse' is a complex object, composed of different properties and qualities and is capable of being defined by reducing it into its smallest parts. Moore argues further that 'good' and similar terms are not complex. They are simple parts to which we refer when we define complex objects, but which are incapable of reduction or definition themselves. In order to better illustrate what he means, he gives an example at §7 where he likens the term 'good' with 'yellow.' He explains in §7 that 'yellow' is a simple notion that cannot be sufficiently defined for someone who has never seen the colour. To give such a person a list of qualities of 'yellow,' say, that it is the colour of bananas and lemons; it is one of the primary colours; and on a colour spectrum it will be seen between orange and green, will not fully explain to them what the colour yellow is. For someone who has never seen yellow could not possibly come to picture an image of yellow by being given a list of qualities that help to make up the notion of 'yellow.'

§7 My point is that 'good' is a simple notion, just as 'yellow' is a simple notion; that just as you cannot, by any manner of means explain to any one who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is.¹¹ §10 'Good,' then, if we mean by it the quality which we assert to belong to a thing when we say that the thing is good, is incapable of any definition, in the most important sense of the word. The most important sense of 'definition' is that in which a definition states what the parts which invariably compose a certain whole; and in this sense 'good' has no definition because it is simple and has no parts.¹²

So, crucially, Moore's point is that 'good' and 'bad' are simple notions incapable of sufficient definition; in the same way that he thinks 'yellow' cannot be defined.

1.2 Natural and Non-natural

¹¹ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p. 7

¹² *Ibid* p. 9

Moore explains that objects that are good may also be something else; say for instance all good things are also pleasurable. This could be true, but according to Moore, when one refers to other properties such as ‘pleasurable’ as a means of *defining* ‘good,’ one commits the naturalistic fallacy.¹³ Essentially Moore’s argument is that the word ‘good’ is a simple non-natural term used to build definitions of complex objects, but that it is incapable of being defined itself. The question of why Moore claims the term ‘good’ is a non-natural one as opposed to natural is interesting. At §12 he says this:

When a man confuses two natural objects with one another, defining the one by the other, if for instance, he confuses himself, who is one natural object, with ‘pleased’ or with ‘pleasure’ which are others, then there is no reason to call the fallacy naturalistic. But if he confuses ‘good,’ which is not in the same sense a natural object, with any natural object whatever, then there is a reason for calling that a naturalistic fallacy...As for the reasons why good is not to be considered a natural object, they may be reserved for discussion in another place.¹⁴

He goes on to claim that whether ‘good’ is considered natural or non-natural a fallacy would still occur, though if it were non-natural it would no longer be correct to call it the *naturalistic* fallacy. Moore’s goal is to show no *natural* quality can be identical to the term ‘good.’ As said above, Moore devotes a few lines in the first section of *Principia Ethica* to the question of what he means by *natural* qualities and admits later in a reply to one of his critics that “in *Principia Ethica* I did not give any tenable explanation of what I meant by saying that “good” was not a natural property.”¹⁵

However insufficient Moore’s account of ‘natural’ is, he does still give various examples of the naturalistic fallacy, one of which we will look at now as a means to assess what it is that Moore really meant by accusing someone of committing the naturalistic fallacy. One of the first examples he uses at §14 is the doctrine of Jeremy Bentham.¹⁶ In the first chapter of Bentham’s *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, he asserts:

¹³ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, §6-§7 pp 6-8

¹⁴ *Ibid* pp 13-14

¹⁵ Schlipp, P. A. (ed.) (1968) *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, La Salle Illinois: Open Court p. 582

¹⁶ It should be noted that it was Henry Sidgwick who argued that Jeremy Bentham commits the naturalistic fallacy. For the purposes of my thesis I will concentrate only on Bentham’s arguments to illustrate how he appears to fall into the naturalistic fallacy.

I. NATURE has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think...The *principle of utility* recognises this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.¹⁷

What Bentham means by utility is the property found in an object that tends to produce pleasure or happiness and prevent pain or unhappiness. For an action to be conformable to the principle utility, it has to add to the sum total of pleasure or happiness, or diminish the sum total of pain or unhappiness.¹⁸

X. Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done. One may say also, that it is right it should be done; at least that it is not wrong it should be done: that it is a right action; at least that it is not a wrong action. When thus interpreted, the words *ought*, and *right* and *wrong*, and others of that stamp, have a meaning: when otherwise, they have none.¹⁹

The following extract from Moore's *Principia Ethica* helps to show us exactly what Moore thinks Bentham is doing wrong:

§14 Bentham seems to imply...that the word 'right' means 'conducive to general happiness.' Now this, by itself, need not necessarily involve the naturalistic fallacy. For the word 'right' is very commonly appropriated to action which lead to the attainment of what is good; which are regarded as *means* to the ideal and not of ends-in-themselves. This use of 'right,' as denoting what is good as a means, whether or not it be also good as an end, is indeed the use to which I shall confine the word. Had Bentham been using 'right' in this sense, it might be perfectly consistent for him to *define* right as 'conducive to the general happiness,' *provided only* (and notice this proviso) he had already proved, or laid down as an axiom, that general happiness was *the* good, or (what is equivalent to this) that general happiness alone was good. For in that case he would have already defined *the* good as

¹⁷ Bentham, J. (1948) *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, with an introduction by Lawrence J. Lafleur, New York and London: Hafner Press, p. 2 (First published in part, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, in 1789 by Oxford)

¹⁸ Ibid p. 3

¹⁹ Ibid p. 4

general happiness (a position perfectly consistent, as we have seen, with the contention that 'good' is indefinable), and, since right was to be defined as 'conducive to *the* good,' it would actually *mean* 'conducive to general happiness.'²⁰

If we follow Moore, then the problem with Bentham's argument that led him to be accused of being susceptible to the naturalistic fallacy was that he had not yet established that the general happiness was *the* good, or in other words that general happiness alone was good. Further, Moore states, "What I am maintaining is that the *reasons* which [Bentham] actually gives for his ethical proposition are fallacious ones so far as they consist in a definition of right."²¹

1.3 Classes of Ethical Questions

At §24 the beginning of the second chapter, which is dedicated to Naturalistic Ethics, Moore asserts that all ethical questions fall into one of three classes.²²

1. 'What is meant by good?'
2. 'What things are good in themselves?'
3. 'What causal relations hold between what is best in itself and other things?'

The first class is discussed in chapter one of *Principia Ethica*, and the second in chapters two to four. To begin his discussion on the second class and Naturalistic Ethics, Moore explains that naturalism is the approach to Ethics, which holds that 'good' can be substituted for a property of a natural object and that 'good' can be defined in terms of natural properties. At §26 we are confronted again with the question of what are 'natural objects'? And, further, what are 'natural properties'? To illustrate the distinction between these two questions Moore says:

§26 By 'nature,' then, I do mean and have meant that which is the subject-matter of the natural sciences and also of psychology. It may be said to include all that has existed, does exist, or will exist in time. If we consider whether any object is of such a nature that it may be

²⁰ Ibid p. 18

²¹ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, §14 p. 19

²² Ibid §24 p. 37

said to exist now, to have existed, or be about to exist, then we may know that that object is a natural object, and that nothing, of which this is not true, is a natural object.²³

It should be noted here that Moore moves from an argument of linguistic nature to an argument of metaphysical nature. Now, the question is what properties of natural objects are natural properties? Moore's test is the same as with natural objects, he asks if a property such as 'good' can exist independently from the object, and of course Moore's argument is that it cannot. However, Moore does not give any examples of properties of natural objects, which can exist independently from their objects in time. He does say that thoughts and feelings exist in time, so we may be safe to assume that by 'natural property' he means properties such as 'pleasant' and 'desired,' which are thoughts or feelings, and which can exist independently from the object to which they are associated. And his criticism is against the naturalists who "declare the sole good to consist in some one property of things, which exists in time; and which do so because they suppose that 'good' itself can be defined by reference to such a property."²⁴

1.4 Moore on Metaphysics, and other Terms

Moore moves into a discussion of metaphysical ethics in chapter four. In this chapter his main focus is on ethical theories that hold that "ethical truths logically follow from metaphysical truths [and] that Ethics should be based on *Metaphysics*. And the result is that they all describe the Supreme Good in *metaphysical* terms."²⁵ Moore argues that metaphysics has no logical bearing on the answer to the question 'What is good in itself?' His point is that ethical theories that define the term 'good' in metaphysical terms will fall into the very same trap as those who define it in natural terms.

In the first four chapters of *Principia Ethica* Moore gives us an introduction and various accounts of the naturalistic fallacy, so here, I feel, is a good place to attempt to further clarify exactly what is meant by the naturalistic fallacy. Firstly, I believe the key terms that we must understand and be able to distinguish between are: *naturalism* and *non-*

²³ Ibid §26 p. 40

²⁴ Ibid §27 p. 41

²⁵ Ibid §66 p. 110

naturalism (or *anti-naturalism*), *ethical terms* and *non-ethical terms*, *natural properties* and *non-natural properties*. We must comprehend how these terms are used in order to assess whether Moore is being fair in his accusation that so many theories fall prey to the naturalistic fallacy. So put simply, naturalism is the view that holds that ‘good’ can be defined in terms of natural properties such as pleasantness, or desirability. In opposition is non-naturalism, which is the view that any attempt by anyone, but particularly by naturalists, to define ‘good’ in terms of natural properties will be guilty of committing the naturalistic fallacy. For non-naturalists the term ‘good’ is indefinable, it is a simple term that cannot be reduced any further.

Moore himself is a non-naturalist, which means that he believed it is a mistake to attempt to define ethical terms by using natural properties. As we learned above Moore holds the view that ethical terms such as ‘good’ are indefinable. Naturalists, such as Jeremy Bentham, oppose this view and define ethical terms each in their own way. For Bentham ‘right’ *means* conducive to the total sum of happiness, and Moore claims in *Principia Ethica* that this led Bentham to fall into the naturalistic fallacy.

1.5 The Open Question Argument

In recent scholarship there is a discussion of what is often called Moore’s Open Question Argument, and this bears on the issue at hand. So it will help to look at this here. In *Metaphysics after Moore* (2006) Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons tell us:

Moore famously began the 100 years of metaethics with his open question argument – which he thought exposed the fallaciousness of all ‘reductive’ accounts of moral terms and concepts. On the basis of this argument, Moore concluded that the primary concept of ethics – goodness – is ‘simple and indefinable’.²⁶

So far we have seen why Moore believed ‘good’ to be a simple indefinable notion, and in this section I will illustrate one means by which he argued his case. Moore used the Open Question Argument as evidence that he was correct in his claim that ‘good’ is

²⁶ Horgan, T., and Timmons, M., (eds) (2006) *Metaphysics after Moore*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 6

indefinable. I will first explain how this argument works and then I will consider certain criticisms of this line of arguing.

Essentially the Open Question Argument is the theory that it will always be a *significant* question to ask if something really is good, or really does possess the quality ‘goodness.’²⁷ Here is how Moore explains his Open Question Argument at §13 of *Principia Ethica*:

§ 13(1) The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by consideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good.²⁸

In this extract Moore illustrates the important fact that whenever the term good is identified in terms of any other property it will always be justifiable to ask, as William D. Casebeer states, “‘But is x good?’” (where x represents your favorite contender for the reduction of the moral property “good”)²⁹ Scholars point out that the Open Question Argument may be condensed down to two types of questions: An example of the first sort is “But is it good?” and an example of the second type is “Why ought I to do or accept it?”³⁰ This point is further clarified in the following extract from Philip Stratton-Lake and Brad Hooker’s article ‘Scanlon versus Moore on Goodness’:

Moore works with two versions of his question, which we will call the ‘property’ version and ‘object’ version. According to the property version, the open question is ‘Is it good that A is n ?’ where n is the natural property with which good is to be identified...The object version of the question does not ask whether it is good that A is n , but asks whether an A that is n is good. Here the question is not whether it is good that something possesses the natural property in terms of which ‘good’ is to be defined, but whether the thing that has this property is good. This is the more familiar version of the open question...³¹

²⁷ The term ‘significant’ is taken to simply mean that the statement is not a mere truism or tautology.

²⁸ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, § 13 p. 15

²⁹ Casebeer, W. D. (2003) *Natural Ethical Facts: Evolution, connectionism, and moral cognition*, Cambridge, Mass; London: The MIT Press, p. 19

³⁰ Kurtz, P. W. ‘Naturalistic Ethics and the Open Question,’ in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 52, No. 5. (Mar., 3, 1955), p. 115

³¹ Stratton-Lake, P., and Hooker, B. ‘Scanlon versus Moore on Goodness,’ in *Metaphysics after Moore*, pp. 150-151

I will be focussing on the more familiar version, as I believe it is more relevant in terms of analysing arguments regarding the naturalistic fallacy.

To further simplify the Open Question Argument, consider the following extract from J. J. Thomson's 'The Legacy of *Principia*':

Moore thought that the following thesis was obvious and in no need of argument:

(Moore's Premise) There is such a property as goodness.

Surely there is a property that all and only good things have in common; that is the property goodness.

Here now is the premise of the open question argument:

(OQA Premise) Whatever natural property NP you fix on, it is an open question whether things that have NP also have goodness.

The conclusion of the argument is:

(OQA Conclusion) There is no natural property NP such that NP is identical with the property goodness.

(Moore's Conclusion) The property goodness is a non-natural property.³²

An example of the Open Question Argument can be seen by setting out the following argument. Let A be the agent. If one asserts (as naturalists often have):

Whatever is pleasant is good

Thus A ought to do what is pleasant (X)

Then it will always be a significant question to ask whether X is in fact good. To clarify this further, consider the following extension from the above argument in which good is regarded as being equivalent to pleasant, and A is again the agent:

P1 A wants to do whatever is good

P2 Whatever is pleasant is good

Therefore

³² Thomson, J. J. 'The Legacy of *Principia*,' in *Metaphysics after Moore*, p. 233

- P3 A ought to do what is pleasant/pleasurable
 P4 Taking drugs is pleasurable (thus pleasant)
 Therefore
 P5 A ought to take drugs

It should seem obvious that the final conclusion would be unacceptable to most people, since most would undoubtedly dispute the fact that although the effects of drugs may very well be pleasant this does not necessarily make taking them *good*. Thus it would be a relevant and *significant* question to ask either of the two forms of the Open Question, “But is taking drugs good?” or “Why ought A accept the conclusion that they ought to take drugs?” One could substitute any number of properties or terms in place of ‘drugs’ and it will still be a significant question to ask – but is X (i.e. drugs etcetera) good? Moore saw potential in this argument as a tool to use against the naturalists – since no matter how many different definitions they try and give for ‘good’ there is always going to be an Open Question as to whether X really is *good*.

1.6 Criticisms of the Open Question Argument

In the previous subsection I gave an analysis of how the Open Question Argument works, and how it was represented in Moore’s work. In this subsection I would like to look closely at the problems with the Open Question Argument and in so doing show why it has been claimed that this argument has weakened Moore’s own. To begin I would like to investigate the following quote given by Connie S. Rosati in an article titled ‘Naturalism, Normativity, and the Open Question Argument’:

The phenomenal influence of G. E. Moore’s “open question” argument on twentieth century metaethics may now seem undeserved. On one important interpretation, for instance, Moore’s argument for the unanalyzability of ‘good’ relies upon an account of analysis that would have the result that no terms are definable. If the argument shows anything, then, it shows too much, and thus it reveals nothing of special interest about ‘good.’³³

³³ Rosati, C. S. ‘Naturalism, Normativity, and the Open Question Argument,’ in *Nous* (Mar., 1995) p. 46

In this quote Rosati refers to the ‘phenomenal influence’ of the Open Question Argument, this reference can be understood to mean that Moore’s realisation of the potential this argument has, as a tool against the naturalists, was the cause of much debate. There are those who agree with Moore that the Open Question Argument really will counter any definition naturalists attempt to give for the term ‘good,’ while there are others like Rosati who believe the argument to be flawed. The important criticism that is produced in this quote is that although the Open Question Argument may very well expose ‘good’ to the charge of unanalysability, and although this would serve the purpose of Moore and other non-naturalists, the problem is that it also renders other terms susceptible to the same charge. To illustrate and clarify this point I will apply the Open Question Argument structure to a term other than good, which will show that good is not the only term affected by this argument. Suppose we try ‘evil’ instead of ‘good:’

Premise One	Evil things contain the property ‘evilness’ ³⁴
Premise Two	Whatever is evil is undesirable
Premise Three	X is undesirable
OQA	But is X evil?
OQA Conclusion	Evilness is not identical to any other property such as undesirability

If we were to substitute, X for, say, swearing and simplify the above argument form then we have the following:

Premise One	Whatever is evil is undesirable
Premise Two	Swearing is undesirable
Therefore	
Conclusion	Swearing is evil

This conclusion would clearly be false, since most would agree the act of swearing does not constitute what it means to be evil. Thus, it would be significant to ask the open question ‘But is swearing evil?’ This demonstration shows that the term ‘evil,’ along

³⁴ For lack of a better word I have used ‘evilness’ to represent the property all evil things contain.

with the term good is susceptible to unanalysability. Rosati's point is that if we had the space to go through all ethical predicates the result would be the same. However, Moore's aim is not to show that no ethical term can be defined, he is concerned only with 'good.' This is why it may be true that the Open Question Argument does too much.

The Open Question Argument does seem to lend some support to Prior's claim that we should take up Aristotle's divide (which was mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, and which will be discussed further in part three). As we saw in the arguments set out above, when one attempts to identify ethical terms such as 'good' and 'evil' with non-ethical or natural terms such as pleasant and undesirable one must conclude that the ethical terms simply cannot be analysed in this way. It is always going to be justifiable to ask the open question, and this question is always going to be significant. It could be that Prior means to suggest that when one is analysing ethical predicates one ought to stay firmly within the confines of the ethical sphere, and when assessing natural terms one must limit oneself to the natural sphere. It could be that this point is behind Prior's appeal to Aristotle's distinction.

Rosati's point that the Open Question Argument shows too much means that one will not be able to avoid the Open Question Argument even when dealing with ethical predicates, while staying within the ethical sphere. When one attempts to define an ethical term with another ethical term the open question argument still applies. To illustrate this we need only consider the above argument and replace 'undesirable' with 'wrong' and it will still be a significant question to ask 'X is wrong, but is X evil?' The Open Question Argument may be troubling within the ethical sphere, but it does not appear to be so within the natural sphere. If one tries to identify a natural term with another similar natural term the problem does not occur:

Premise One	Whenever one is successful one is victorious
Premise Two	One was successful in winning the gold medal
Therefore	
Conclusion	One was victorious

The two natural terms mean the same and can be substituted in a way ethical terms cannot. So it may be that we ought to respect the divisions of the spheres of inquiry, but even if we do we will not be rid of the Open Question Argument and we would still be forced to concede that 'good' is indefinable. Furthermore, we would then be forced to also concede that no ethical term is definable or analysable and as Rosati argues this seems to be saying too much.

It may have been this issue or something like it that led to comments such as the following. The first is by Stratton-Lake and Hooker in *Metaethics after Moore*, they state:

Moore presents the open question argument as an argument for the view that naturalists commit a fallacy. Unfortunately, Moore was rather vague about what this fallacy is supposed to be...³⁵

The second is by Paul Bloomfield, also from *Metaethics after Moore*:

At least in regard to the open question argument, it seems clear that Moore himself was not at all clear about what he was on to. Perhaps everyone agrees that it was something both deep and important. Exactly what it is, however, is still a bit of a mystery.³⁶

What we have seen so far is that those who have discussed the Open Question Argument have done so in such a way that it is unclear what exactly is being said. It seems as though even they themselves are unsure of exactly what they are saying. This is frustrating as it makes the task of understanding Prior's interpretation of Moore even more difficult. However, we must dig a little deeper and see if it becomes any clearer.

1.7 Prior's Arguments Regarding Moore

Prior begins his discussion of Moore in chapter one of *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*. His aim in this chapter is to explain the naturalistic fallacy and to show Moore's argument "not as disproving ethical naturalism itself, but as exposing an inconsistency

³⁵ Stratton-Lake, P., and Hooker, B. 'Scanlon versus Moore on Goodness,' p. 149

³⁶ Bloomfield, P. 'Opening Question, Following Rules,' in *Metaethics after Moore*, p. 169

into which some naturalists have fallen.”³⁷ Prior explains that Moore recognised that there is a difference between *identity of denotation* (objects to which a term is applicable) and *identity of connotation* (characteristics which an object must have for the term to be applicable to it) and from this developed an argument to show that ‘good’ is indefinable.³⁸ After this introduction to Moore’s arguments Prior starts right in on illustrating difficulties, as he sees them, in the arguments. I would like to outline the difficulties here and refer back to them later in Part Three.

Prior states:

If the words ‘good’ and, say, the word ‘pleasant’ apply to the same things, but do not attribute the same quality to them, then to say that what is pleasant is good, or that what is good is pleasant, is to make a significant statement, however obvious its truth may appear to many people. But if the word ‘good’ and the word ‘pleasant’ not merely have the same application but the same connotation or ‘meaning’ – if, that is to say, the quality of pleasantness is identical with the quality of goodness – then to say that what is good is pleasant, or that what is pleasant is good, is to utter an empty tautology...³⁹

Prior points out that from this consideration Moore makes two claims in his quest to show that ‘good’ is incapable of definition.

By ‘definition’ he [Moore] means the exhibition of a quality referred to by some term as a combination of simpler qualities. (1) And he argues that if we take any such combination of relatively simple qualities (such as the combination ‘being what we desire to desire’), the statement that what possesses this combination of qualities is good (e.g. the statement that what we desire to desire is good) will always be found on careful inspection to be a significant statement and not a mere truism (like ‘What we desire to desire, we desire to desire’). But this is not all he claims to be able to show by this method. (2) We may use it, he thinks, to show that goodness is not only simple, i.e. incapable of analysis into simpler parts, but unique. For even if we take a *simple* quality, such as pleasantness, we can always see that it is significant, and not a mere truism to assert that what possesses this quality is good.⁴⁰

³⁷ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. 1

³⁸ *Ibid* p. 2-3

³⁹ *Ibid* p. 2

⁴⁰ *Ibid* pp. 2-3

The first difficulty Prior identifies is in regard to Moore's second claim (2). This claim, Prior explains, means that if goodness is indeed *unique*, then it would always be a significant statement to assert that whatever possesses a simple quality is good. For example, if goodness is unique then for one to claim that 'X possesses the quality pleasantness therefore X is good' is a significant statement. To further clarify this example, one might suggest 'Helping people is pleasurable therefore helping people is good,' if this statement is true it is not a tautology, it is significant.

However, Prior recognises that this claim does not apply to the term 'good' or the quality 'goodness,' because to say that whatever possesses the quality goodness is good, is a truism and not significant. He also asserts that it is a truism to say that goodness is not the same as any other quality. It seems as though Prior's contention with Moore's claim is that any quality can be said to be unique. Prior quotes from the title page of *Principia Ethica*, "Everything is what it is, and not another thing."⁴¹ If everything is what it is, and not another, then any simple quality is also going to be unique and only what it is. Take pleasantness, for example, it is what it is and it is not anything that it is not. And as we have seen, naturalists identify goodness with simple qualities such as pleasantness, or desiredness; and if we apply Prior's claim, even naturalists would not deny that a thing is what it is, thus admitting that everything is unique.

Moore's goal as we have learnt was to show us that anyone who defines 'good' in terms of a natural or simple quality will be guilty of committing the naturalistic fallacy because 'good' itself is a simple undefinable term. However, what Prior seems to be suggesting is that although some naturalists hold the view that 'goodness' is identical to, say, 'pleasantness' they would still admit the truism that 'pleasantness' is what it is and not another thing; thus 'pleasantness' is in this way unique. So, either this shows a problem for Moore (who argues that 'good' cannot be defined in terms of a natural/simple quality due to the fact that 'good' is unique) because, according to Prior, it may be *possible* to hold both that 'goodness and pleasantness are identical' and that 'goodness and pleasantness are unique.' Or, it shows an inconsistency in the

⁴¹ This sentence is a quote from Bishop Butler. Prior gives the context in which it is found (p. 4) but it is not critical for present purposes to look at this in any depth. It will suffice to say that the paragraph in which the sentence can be found in *Sermons on Human Nature*, Preface, par. 39 was directed against those who believed that disinterestedness was the essence of virtue, thus it is not in anyone's interest to be virtuous.

naturalists' point of view, since it seems contradictory to hold both that 'X is identical to Y' and yet 'X and Y are unique.' The question that this contradiction raises is simply, how is it possible for two terms to be the same and yet each unique? Prior correctly, tells us at the beginning of chapter one that he aims to show us why we ought to regard Moore's argument as exposing an inconsistency to which some naturalists have fallen. I believe we should take this point as the start of an explanation of this inconsistency.

Another complication that Prior points out concerns what Moore means by the term *natural*. According to Moore, 'good' cannot be defined in terms of natural properties. We looked at Moore's position regarding this difficulty at sub-section 1.4 *Natural and Non-natural* so here I would like to analyse Prior's take on the problem. As we saw above, Moore admitted later that his account of 'natural' in *Principia Ethica* was less than satisfactory. Prior was well aware of this. Prior suggests that we might take Moore's "naturalness" to simply refer to "something more than mere non-identity with goodness or badness."⁴² Prior claims that Moore may have held the view that when qualities are compared with goodness and badness there is a difference evident between them. There is something almost universal that 'natural' qualities possess, that only becomes obvious when one such quality is compared with either goodness or badness. The example Prior uses is, if we compare qualities such as pleasantness, pinkness, or everlastingness to goodness and badness, the former and latter are clearly of different sorts. Prior calls these different sorts the *realm of fact* and the *realm of value or duty*. Qualities such as pleasantness and pinkness would come under the realm of fact; for example, it would be a fact to state that an object possesses the quality pinkness, if it is true that it does. It is not as easy to say the same sort of statement when in place of pinkness we substitute goodness, since the question can be asked whether the object really does possess the quality goodness. The qualities goodness and badness then would fall into the realm of value or duty. This, again, looks like Prior takes Aristotle's division as basic and unquestioned.

Prior believes this distinction, between fact and value, is what Moore refers to when he speaks of 'natural' and 'ethical' as two distinct categories. And here Prior perceives a

⁴² Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. 5

problem, “it may be held – it is held by Professor Moore... – that to say something is our duty, or possesses value, is to state a fact.”⁴³ This could be a problem because if it is a fact that something is a duty or has value then they should come under the realm of fact. However, the point may be that whether something is good or bad is in dispute, not whether or not something is a duty or of value. It could be a fact that one has a duty to carry out a particular action, and it could be true that that action possesses value, though it could still be asked whether that action possesses the quality goodness or badness. This would land us back with the dilemma of whether something is a duty or of value because it is good, or good because it is a duty or of value. Regardless, it is unlikely that it would be a problem for Moore if the statements ‘X is a duty’ or ‘Y possesses value’ are facts, since the question of goodness or badness would be enough to create a distinction between the realm of duty or value and the realm of fact. Statements within the realm of fact are fact; and the statements within the realm of duty or value can be questioned. If they could not, they would be fact.

Prior proposes that although Moore appeals to the truism ‘Everything is what it is, and not another thing’ his argument is not “entirely pointless.” Prior notes that there will be times when others deny logical truisms; these people want to ‘have it both ways.’ It is against these people’s arguments that Moore’s position is especially effective. Prior claims that it is not toward naturalists *per se* that Moore’s argument is directed, but toward naturalists who are not consistent. Naturalists believe ‘good’ can be identified by appealing to natural qualities like pleasantness. On the surface this position seems quite secure. However, inconstant naturalists want to be able to say the statement ‘Nothing is good but pleasure’ is significant because ‘goodness’ *means* ‘pleasantness.’ And herein lies the problem; inconsistent naturalists want to hold both that ‘good’ is identical to ‘pleasantness’ *and* that ‘good’ is not identical to ‘pleasantness.’ One cannot have it both ways; they either are or are not identical. This dilemma fits with the discussion above regarding truisms and significant statements, and the problem with either ‘X equals by definition Y’ or ‘X does not equal by definition Y.’

Moore’s main aim is to refute naturalism, but Prior provides a means of escape on behalf of the naturalists. According to Prior, an inconsistent naturalist has two options;

⁴³ Ibid p. 6

the first is that they can renounce their naturalism. In choosing this option, the inconsistent naturalist could “continue to insist that only pleasure, or conduciveness to survival, or whatever it may be, is good, but may preserve the significance of this assertion by sacrificing its certainty, admitting that its denial, though in his opinion false, is not self-contradictory.”⁴⁴ From this position an inconsistent naturalist would avoid the inconsistency of which they are accused. The second option, Prior argues, could save naturalists from having to discard their naturalism; this can be achieved by admitting a truism. If a naturalist admits that for them it *is* a truism to say that only pleasure, or desire, or conduciveness to survival is good, then they may insist that what they are stating is not an ethical statement. Take the statement ‘Nothing but pleasure is good,’ a naturalist may assert that this is a way of showing that the study of Ethics is actually to be concerned with determining what is pleasant. Though this could lead to the need for the naturalist to deny that there is actually a doctrine of Ethics. If the naturalist proposes that the study of Ethics should be concerned with pleasure then, Prior argues, it ought to be called something like Hedonics, or if it were the study of what is conducive to survival it ought to be called Biological Strategy. Prior also suggests that a naturalist

might say that...what he really means by the assertion that ‘Nothing is good but pleasant’ – [is] not that what is pleasant alone possesses some other quality ‘goodness’, but that there are no such qualities beyond ‘natural’ ones such as pleasantness to which the word ‘goodness’ could be applied.⁴⁵

So if we follow what Prior has said so far then the naturalist may be able to escape the clutches of Moore’s arguments. But Prior seems to draw a very weird conclusion from this. He seems to think that insofar as the naturalist can escape Moore’s clutches, the naturalist must forgo the study of Ethics altogether – because according to Prior there would be no such thing as Ethics; there would only be Hedonics, or Biological Strategy, or some other such thing. But what is weird is that Prior should think this means we must forgo Ethics. All it means is that we would be studying Hedonics, or Biological Strategy, or whatever else you want to call it. And a consistent naturalist need not have any problem at all with that – for the consistent naturalist will simply say that Ethics *is*

⁴⁴ Ibid p. 9

⁴⁵ Ibid p. 10

Hedonics, and so because there is Hedonics, there is Ethics. Prior seems to be begging the question here and trying to get away with rather a lot.

There is one more point that Prior covers in his first chapter. This point concerns Moore himself:

It remains true, however, that a naturalist *can* extricate himself from Professor Moore's trap if he is bold enough and tough enough. And in imagining that in his refutation of what he calls the 'naturalist fallacy' he has refuted naturalism, (a) Professor Moore has himself fallen into a fallacy not unlike it. (b) For if Professor Moore's own non-naturalism is a significant belief, then it must be possible to formulate the naturalism which it contradicts in a significant way; and if naturalism itself, and not merely the inadvertent combination of naturalism with something inconsistent with it, is senseless, (c) then the denial of it is trivial. (d) A significant non-naturalism, in other words, must comprise more than mere freedom from the 'naturalistic fallacy'.⁴⁶

For the remainder of this section I would like to concentrate on what it is that Prior means in this extract. Since we have just looked at how a non-naturalist may escape the trouble of the naturalist fallacy, I would like to focus on (a) how Moore is said to fall into fallacious reasoning. Prior stresses (b) that for Moore's non-naturalism to be significant it should be possible to formulate the contrary naturalism in a significant way. If we take a 'significant statement' to mean a statement that is not a truism or empty tautology, then Prior is saying that for Moore's non-naturalism to not be a truism, the naturalism that contradicts it must also not be a truism. (c) For if naturalism is found to be a mere truism, Prior argues, it would be trivial to deny it.

In order to clarify Prior's argument in the extract above, we must look at what we have learnt so far. Naturalism is the belief that ethical terms such as 'good' can be defined by appealing to natural terms like 'pleasantness' or 'desiredness.' Non-naturalism is the theory that holds that it is impossible to define ethical terms such as 'good' because they are simple, indefinable, and incapable of reduction to smaller parts. Moore as a non-naturalist maintained both that 'good' is a simple indefinable term and that anyone who attempts to argue as naturalists do will commit the naturalist fallacy. Naturalists

⁴⁶ Ibid p. 12

commit the naturalist fallacy and because of this they are said to hold statements that are mere truisms, and thus not significant.

If the statement (i) 'What is good is pleasure' is not significant, then should not the statement (ii) 'Good is a simple indefinable term' fall prey to the same fate? Those who hold that (i) is significant are supposedly guilty of the naturalist fallacy because they are identifying 'good' with a natural term and are in essence asserting that 'good' is identical to 'pleasure' or whatever natural term they choose. If X (good) is identical to Y (pleasure) then it is a truism to give the statement 'What is X is Y.' And of course (i) is a statement with exactly this form. As we saw above, *significant* statements are those that are not truisms, hence the assertion 'What is X is Y' is not a significant statement. Those that hold that (ii) is significant may not be guilty of committing the naturalistic fallacy, but if we take Prior at his word they do not hold a truly significant belief either. To give the statement 'Good is a simple indefinable term' seems to be a definition, only in this case it is not using natural terms. If it is true that 'good' is indefinable, then would it not be a truism to give the statement 'Good is indefinable,' and would this statement not also constitute a definition, albeit not a natural one? If this is indeed the case, then it could be argued, and it seems Prior has, that non-naturalism also falls into a fallacy, whether it be the naturalistic fallacy, or something not unlike it.

The main point in the extract above is that if naturalism is not a significant belief, then neither is non-naturalism. Prior asserts that (d) a significant non-naturalism must comprise of more than mere freedom from the naturalist fallacy. It does seem to be true that non-naturalism is not burdened by the naturalistic fallacy, because it does not identify ethical statements with non-ethical or natural terms. However, the non-naturalists' argument does seem to be an attempt at defining a supposedly indefinable term, so it could be claimed that their argument like the naturalists' rests on a truism. And as we have seen a truism is not a significant statement. According to Prior, for non-naturalism to be free from fallacious reasoning, it must first be shown that the same can be applied to naturalism, for if naturalism holds a significant belief, so too will non-naturalism.

Moore's arguments are important and worthy of more attention so I will revisit them again in section three, where I will try to isolate what I think may be the sources of

some confusion. I will now move on to the second section, in which I will be looking at the arguments put forward by Ralph Cudworth concerning the naturalistic fallacy.

Part Two

Ralph Cudworth

2.1 Cudworth's Argument Regarding Will and Nature

In this part of my thesis I am going to concentrate on the philosophy of 17th Century Ralph Cudworth. Prior spends a lot of time discussing Cudworth in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, more time than on many of the others he mentions. As I said above, and as indicated in the title of this thesis, one of the tasks set out is to investigate Prior's claims regarding the naturalistic fallacy, and how these claims relate to the philosophers he comments on. So as not to fall into the trap of discussing far too many theories in such a small amount of space it makes sense to limit myself to discussing Moore and Cudworth for they are two of the few Prior dedicates more than a mere mention to. Prior argues that the same mistake arises in the ways that Moore and Cudworth argue, so I am going to look into the reasons why Prior makes this claim, and how this relates to the naturalistic fallacy. In order to satisfactorily examine Prior's claims we must first consider Cudworth's philosophical views. Let us start with a quote from Cudworth's *Treatise concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*⁴⁷:

§813-§815 I. WHEREFORE in the first Place, it is a Thing which we shall very easily demonstrate, That Moral Good and Evil, Just and Unjust, Honest and Dishonest, (i) (if they be not meer [sic] Names without any Signification, or Names for nothing else, but Willed and Comanded, but have a Reality in Respect of the Persons obliged to do and avoid them) cannot possibly be Arbitrary things, made by Will without Nature; because it is Universally true, That things are what they are, not by Will but by Nature. (ii) As for Example Things are White by Whiteness, and Black by Blackness, Triangular by Triangularity, and Round by Rotundity, Like by Likeness, and Equal by Equality, that is, by such certain Natures of their own. (iii) Neither can Omnipotence itself (to speak with Reverence) by meer Will make

⁴⁷ It should be noted that some of the quotes from Cudworth have been taken from *British Moralists* (1964) by Selby-Bigge and others from Sarah Hutton's (1996) publication of Cudworth's *Treatise*. The Selby-Bigge publication has only a selection of Cudworth's *Treatise* so where additional extracts have been required I have turned to Hutton.

a Thing White or Black without Whiteness or Blackness...And since a Thing cannot be made a thing by meer Will without a Being or Nature, every Thing must be necessarily and immutably by its own Nature, and the Nature of things be that which it is, and nothing else. For though the Will and Power of God have an Absolute, Infinite and Unlimited Command upon the Existences of all Created things to make them be, or not to be at Pleasure; yet when things exist, they are what they are, This or That, Absolutely or Relatively, not by Will or Arbitrary Command, but by the Necessity of their own Nature.⁴⁸

J. A Passmore describes Cudworth's *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* as "an argument, epistemological and logical, designed to prove that virtue is not 'a mere name'"⁴⁹ and in the extract above we can see that argument played out. (i) Cudworth declares that if good and evil (or bad) are not mere insignificant names, then they cannot be arbitrary things made by will without nature. What he means by this is that (ii) things such as black and white, or triangularity and roundness (to give his examples) are what they are by their very nature. It is impossible for something triangular to be so without possessing the quality of triangularity because it is in the object's nature. At (iii) he asserts that no one has the power of will to make things different to what they are by nature. If something is black by nature, then no force of the will has the power to make it anything other than black, similarly if an object is round by nature then the will cannot change that either. This claim is rather ambiguous, since it seems to suggest that, say, because a snowball is by its nature round, no force of the will could make it anything other than round. This is clearly untrue, however, I think we must assume Cudworth meant the 'will' to mean the mind's will without action. This can also be applied to moral propositions, which claim that things ought to be obeyed.

Cudworth claims that it is through the very nature of laws and commands that they become obligatory, not by the will of whomsoever commands them. He declares that neither God nor any other can make a proposition obligatory that does not itself contain a nature that requires it to be obeyed. From this, I believe we can assume that if things are not morally good by nature before they are commanded then they will not be so after

⁴⁸ Cudworth, R. (1731) 'A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality,' in *British Moralists: Being selections from writers principally of the eighteenth century*, (1964) by L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed), Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, §813-§815 pp 247-248

⁴⁹ Passmore, J. A. (1951) *Ralph Cudworth: An Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 40

one commands them, because one's will does not cause something to be what it is not. Cudworth reinforces this assumption at §816 where he asserts:

§816 And if this were not Morally Good and Just in its own Nature before any Positive Command of God, That God should be Obeyed by his Creatures, the bare Will of God himself could not beget an Obligation upon any to Do what he Willed and Commanded, because the Natures of things do not depend upon Will, being not that are arbitrarily Made, but things that Are. To conclude therefore, even in positive Laws and Commands it is not meer Will that Obligeth, but the Natures of Good and Evil, Just and Unjust, really existing in the World.⁵⁰

As can be seen in this quote, Cudworth's argument is directed at the will of God. Here he declares that even the bare will of God himself could not cause someone to be obligated to do what He commands, because it is not the will but nature that causes an command or law to be obligatory. Thus, commands and laws must have intrinsic obligatory natures in order for them to cause one to be obligated to do as they say. And neither the will of man nor God can change intrinsic nature.

2.2 Cudworth's Criticism of his Predecessors

Passmore, in his interpretation of Cudworth, suggests that Cudworth believed his predecessors asserted both that '*God always wills what is good*' and that '*to be good simply means to be willed by God.*' Passmore proposes, then, that Cudworth's criticism could be formulated in this way: "if a good action is different from an evil one, this difference must be a difference in the act itself and cannot be constituted by its relation to something else. [Thus] if an act is moral, it is so whoever wills it, or fails to will it. It is moral because it is the kind of act that it is."⁵¹ This suggestion is supported by the following extract from Cudworth:

§819 And that it is not meer Will of the Commander, that makes these Positive things to Oblige or become Due, but the Nature of things; appears evidently from hence, because it is not the volition of every one that Obligeth, but of a Person rightly qualified and invested with lawful Authority...§820 But if we would speak yet more accurately

⁵⁰ Cudworth, *A Treatise*, (Selby-Bigge), § 816 p. 250

⁵¹ Passmore, *Ralph Cudworth: An Interpretation*, p. 42

and precisely, we might rather say, That no Positive Commands whatsoever do make any thing morally Good and Evil, Just and Unjust, which Nature had not made such before.⁵²

Although the earlier quote from §816 is directed at the laws and commands of God, the quote above at §819-§820 concerns a common but loose way we speak about how it is possible for one who is *rightly qualified* and *invested with lawful authority* to give obligatory commands. Thus, Cudworth wants his argument to be understood in terms of anyone making an ethical claim.

The nature of ethical claims is that one asserts that another ought to behave in a certain way and Cudworth's critical point is that ethical claims cannot be inferred from non-ethical propositions. If one believed (mistakenly in Cudworth's opinion) that it is someone's will that causes something to be obligatory and also that things are not *by nature* morally good or bad, then one could not really argue that it is bad, for example, to go against an obligation. If it is believed that acts are not naturally good or evil, just or unjust, then a claim that we ought to act in a certain way carries no weight. This is because without the opposite act being proven to be by nature evil or unjust, whomever is commanding that the act ought to be carried out could not claim that act to be good or just, as their belief is that it is not in the nature of the act that makes it obligatory, but in the will of whomever commands it. This is rather complex, the important point is that if we hold that, say, actions are not good or bad by nature then we could not really direct someone to act in a certain way citing the goodness or badness of that act as a reason. The real reason we would be directing someone to act in that way would be because we believe what is commanded by God is good, because His will is good. But the person being given the command or obligation would be right to question why they ought to act in that way, because God's commands could simply be arbitrary. This is similar to Moore's Open Question Argument, in that the agent would be justified in asking 'But are God's commands good?' In this situation, we would not be able to give them the nature of the opposite act to back up our command. Consider, I tell you "You ought to obey your parents because God commands this" I could not appeal to the nature of not obeying your parents to prove to you that God's command is actually good.

⁵² Cudworth, *A Treatise*, (Selby-Bigge), §819-§820 p. 252

If it is the will that causes a command to be obligatory, then the statement ‘Not to do X would be unjust’ could not truly be proven, since there could not be an appeal to the *nature* of X to show that it *is* just. And thus it cannot be shown that not doing X would in fact be unjust. If it were claimed or commanded that to go against X is unjust because one commanded it so, there would be little reason to take the command seriously. We can see this view in the following extract particularly at (i):

§821 (i) We see then...that it is not possible that any Command of God or Man should Oblige otherwise than by Virtue of that which is Naturally Just. (ii) And tho’ Particular Promises and Commands are made by Will, yet it is not Will but Nature that obligeth to the doing of things Promised and Commanded, or makes them such things as ought to be done.⁵³

At (ii) Cudworth speaks of particular promises and commands that are made by will, but for the purposes of my thesis I will not discuss ‘promises’ since a discussion of this sort would introduce additional features that would cloud the issue at hand. It is enough to say that the promises and commands that Cudworth speaks of are related to the question of whether something is commanded because it is good, or good because it is commanded. This was said, by Passmore, to be something Cudworth believed his predecessors struggled with, as they tended to argue both that ‘God’s will is good’ and ‘What is good is willed by God,’ or something very similar to this. Cudworth saw that the two statements are incompatible. This important point will be discussed further throughout the following subsections in this part. Sarah Hutton tells us in her introduction to Cudworth’s *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* that

The treatise is divided into four books. The first of these poses the fundamental question asked by Socrates in Plato’s *Euthyphro*: whether God wills things because they are good, or whether things are good because God wills them. Cudworth’s position is that God, being supremely good, wills things because they are good.⁵⁴

For the remainder of this subsection I would like to take a look at parts of Plato’s *Euthyphro* as I believe it will aid us in gaining a true understanding of Cudworth’s argument in his treatise.

⁵³ Ibid §821 p. 253

⁵⁴ Cudworth, R. *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality: With a treatise of free will*, with an introduction by Sarah Hutton (ed) (1966), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Intro p. xxi

The *Euthyphro* dialogue is set on the porch of the King Archon, Socrates is awaiting trial on the charge of impiety. Euthyphro is also awaiting trial, though he is the pursuer not the defendant. Euthyphro has brought the charge of murder against his father because on his father's orders a poor family dependant was thrown into a ditch after he killed a slave. While waiting to hear from a messenger, who had been sent to find out what ought to be done with the family member, the man died. Over the course of the dialogue Socrates and Euthyphro attempt to come a decision about the nature of impiety, though the task proves to be too difficult to accomplish. In the following extracts we will see the development of a definition of impiety and the problem this definition causes in terms of the relation to the gods.

Socrates. ...I will suppose, if you like, that all the gods condemn and abominate such an action. But I will amend the definition so far as to say what all the gods hate is impious, and what they love pious or holy; and what some of them love and others hate is both or neither. Shall this be our definition of piety and impiety?

Euthyphro. Why not, Socrates?

Soc. Why not! certainly, as far as I am concerned, Euthyphro, there is no reason why not. But whether this premiss will greatly assist you in the task of instructing me as you promised is a matter for you to consider.

Euth. Yes, I should say that what all the gods love is pious and holy, and the opposite which they all hate, impious.

Soc. Ought we to inquire into the truth of this, Euthyphro, or simply to accept it on our own authority and that of others – echoing mere assertions? What do you say?

Euth. We should inquire; and I believe that the statement will stand the test of inquiry.

Soc. We shall soon be better able to say, my good friend. The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.

Soc. And what do you say of piety, Euthyphro: is not piety, according to your definition, loved by all the gods?

Euth. Yes.

Soc. Because it is pious or holy, or for some other reason?

Euth. No that is the reason.

Soc. It is loved because it is holy, not holy because it is loved?

Euth. Apparently.

Soc. And it is the object of the gods' love, and is dear to them, because it is loved of them?

Euth. Certainly.

Soc. Then that which is dear to the gods, Euthyphro, is not holy, nor is that which is holy dear to the gods, as you affirm; but they are two different things.

Euth. How do you mean, Socrates?

Soc. I mean to say that the holy has been acknowledged by us to be loved because it is holy, not to be holy because it is loved.

Euth. Yes.

Soc. But that which is dear to the gods is dear to them because it is loved by them, not loved by them because it is dear to them.

Euth. True.

Soc. But, friend Euthyphro, if that which is holy were the same with that which is dear to the gods, and were loved because it is holy, then that which is dear to the gods would be loved as being dear to them; but if that which is dear to them were dear to them because loved by them, then that which is holy would be holy because loved by them. But now you see that the reverse is the case, and that the two things are quite different from one another. For one is of a kind to be loved because it is loved, and the other is loved because it is of a kind to be loved. Thus you appear to me, Euthyphro, when I ask you what is the nature of holiness, to offer an attribute only, and not the essence – the attribute of being loved by all the gods. But you still do not explain to me the nature of holiness. And therefore, if you please, I will ask you not to hide your treasure, but to start again, and tell me frankly what holiness or piety really is, whether dear to the gods or not (for that is a matter about which we will not quarrel; and what is impiety?)

Euth. I really do not know, Socrates, how to express what I mean. For somehow or other the definitions we propound, on whatever bases we rest them, seem always to turn round and walk away from us.⁵⁵

What should be evident in this dialogue is that when one attempts to define words such as piety in terms of what the gods, or in Cudworth's case God, approves of one will instantly be faced with the dilemma. The dilemma is whether the gods (or God) approve of something because that thing is by nature good or pious, or whether it is only good or pious because the gods (or God) approve it. We will see in the following subsections that Cudworth's *Treatise* was directed against those who chose to identify goodness with approval or the will of God, and as we have learnt from the *Euthyphro* dialogue this line of reasoning will be problematic.

2.3 Cudworth's Argument Against Hobbes

⁵⁵ These extracts are taken from Plato's *Euthyphro* found in *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated into English with Analyses and Introductions by B. Jowett, 9d-10 p. 318, 10d-11b pp 319-320

Passmore explains that *Eternal and Immutable Morality* “as a polemic was directed against three main antagonists”⁵⁶ first was Hobbes, then Ockham and his followers, and the Calvinists, and also Descartes. I would like to focus on Hobbes, and Cudworth’s arguments against his position. Hobbes wrote both on Politics and Ethics, which for him were closely linked and one of his critical arguments was that the state of nature was one in which people lived nasty, brutish, and short lives. The following passage, from the *Leviathan*, illustrates this point:

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth...no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and that which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.⁵⁷

Hobbes proclaimed that the natural tendency of ‘man’ was a state of war, a state in which one had certain ‘natural rights’ and the exercising of such rights leads to a state of neighbour against neighbour. Hobbes’s account of the state of nature was that one had a right to do whatever it took to ensure one’s survival, and because everyone would be doing this there would be a state of people who were looking out only for themselves. This would soon cause chaos since each would want what the other has, and provided the desire was for something conducive to survival or some form of pleasure, then everyone would have a natural right to take what was desired, whatever the cost. At some point people would come to realise that to survive and have as much as any other, there would have to be peace, and the best way to inaugurate a state of peace from the nasty brutish state of nature would be for ‘man’ to obey a civil sovereign. The state of nature was evidence, for Hobbes, of the need for a sovereign authority to regulate and enforce laws to keep the state at peace.

Hobbes was a naturalist, in the sense that he believed that goodness can be identified by obedience to the will (either of God or a civil sovereign). Hobbes’s naturalism, however, was not quite what Prior calls consistent since Hobbes was one who argued

⁵⁶ Passmore, *Ralph Cudworth: An Interpretation*, p. 40

⁵⁷ Hobbes, T. *Leviathan* edited with an introduction by Michael Oakeshott, Oxford: Basis Blackwell, p. 82

both (1) that good and rightness can be identified with a sovereign's will, and (2) that we have an *obligation* to obey the sovereign.⁵⁸ The reason Hobbes is said to be 'not quite consistent' is because to hold both (1) and (2) leads to a contradiction. If something is good because a sovereign or God wills it to be good (1) then it is arbitrary whether or not something is considered *good*. If we have an obligation to a sovereign or God (2) and the reason cited is because what He wills is good, then there is something outside of God which even He must heed, and that is nature. If nature is above God, then He must command only what is good by nature, and if He is not the highest power then we could justifiably ask why we ought to obey him. Thus, both (1) and (2) cannot be held together. According to Moore identifying good with obedience to someone's will, whether it be the will of a sovereign or that of God, will lead straight down the path that leads to the naturalistic fallacy, or a fallacy not unlike it. The reason for this is, Cudworth maintains, that moral good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust cannot be made by will without nature.

The question we saw above regarding whether something is good because it is commanded or commanded because it is good thus presents itself against (1). It presents itself because for good and rightness to be connected with the will of the sovereign an answer needs to be sought. If a sovereign commands that 'One ought to do X' we would be justified in wondering whether we ought to do X because X is good in itself, or whether we are being commanded to do X by mere will, despite there being no such nature requiring us to do X. In other words, Cudworth is showing us that there are two options that one may utilize when attempting to justify commands or obligations given by a sovereign or God. When a sovereign or God commands that we ought to do X:

Either, we ought to do X because

(i) X is intrinsically good

Thus X =_{df} good

Or, we ought to do X because

(ii) X is willed by Y [sovereign or God]

⁵⁸ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. 13

Thus X \neq_{df} good

However, whatever is willed by Y ought to be obeyed⁵⁹

If a naturalist, say Hobbes, were to argue that we ought to do what the sovereign commands because what he or she commands is good, then Hobbes (or other naturalists) would be guilty of appealing to the nature of the commands being commanded. In appealing to the nature of the commands, the naturalist would not be quite consistent since for them it is the will that *causes* the obligatoriness, not the nature of whatsoever act is commanded. If the naturalist were to argue the contrary, that it is in fact the will that *causes* the obligatoriness of the commands, then we have been lead back to (2) that we have an obligation to obey the sovereign, as it is his or her will that causes the obligation to carry out an act that has no such nature. The problem with this assertion is that an obligation cannot come from nothing but will. It would be absurd for one to command something that had no such obligatory nature in itself, and those who were commanded would thus have every right to question why they ought to oblige.

2.4 Accidental Obligations

Cudworth discusses cases, under which we may perhaps be obligated by ‘accident,’

§817 there are some things which the Intellectual Nature obligeth to of it self...and these things are called naturally Good and Evil; other things there are which the same Intellectual Nature Obligeth to by Accident only, and hypothetically, upon Condition of some voluntary Action...⁶⁰

What this means is that there are things that ought to be done because they are good and things that ought not to be done because they are evil; yet there is a third category which encompasses things that are indifferent (which will be referred to as the *category of indifference*). This category of indifference comprises things that do not have an obligatory nature of themselves, as they are neither absolutely good nor absolutely evil.

⁵⁹ The use of $=_{df}$ is to indicate that X is equal by definition to good, and \neq_{df} indicates X does not equal by definition good.

⁶⁰ Cudworth, *A Treatise*, in *British Moralists* by Selby-Bigge, §817 p. 251

These indifferent things may *become* obligatory, and Cudworth's point is that this happens particularly through making promises and entering into covenants. For example, you might promise your neighbour that you will feed their cat while they are away. In so doing you have incurred an 'accidental' obligation. You now have a responsibility to ensure the cat is fed, where there was no such responsibility prior to the promise being made. If you suspected the cat had not been fed while the neighbours were home you would not have felt obligated to make sure the cat had been given food, since you would more than likely have assumed the neighbours would feed their pet. In this case the proposition (a) 'You ought to feed your neighbour's cat' would come under the category of indifference, because it would be neither good nor evil for you to choose to feed it or not, and you certainly would not have an obligation to do so. However, after you have made a promise to feed the cat, proposition (a) acquires a new relation to you, it is then good for you to fulfil your obligation and bad (or evil) not too. The onus would now be on you to ensure the cat does not go hungry. So, while there may be things that come under the category of indifference, it is possible for the will to cause them to become, we could say, 'temporarily' obligatory. However, the will does not change the *nature* of the indifferent thing, the obligation is created through a new relation being formed between the indifferent thing and the agent to whom the obligation will be incurred.

What we have learned about Cudworth so far is, first, there is no being, human or other, that has the power of will to make things what they are not. If an object possesses the quality roundness, neither the will of man nor of God can make it any other thing that does not possess roundness. In the same way, if something is good or obligatory, no one has the power of will to make it bad or not obligatory. Things are what they are by their natures, not because one willed them to be as they are. Second, we have learned that, according to Cudworth, one cannot infer ethical claims from non-ethical propositions. Third, we have also been shown that Cudworth argued against Hobbes, whose naturalism was not quite consistent. And lastly, Cudworth admitted that there are times when it is possible for some things, which are by nature indifferent, to become obligatory. However, this is only temporary and it does not change their nature, because things that are good or bad or indifferent are so by nature and no one has the power to change that. I would now like to move to a discussion about how Cudworth is represented by Prior in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*.

2.5 Prior's Arguments Regarding Cudworth

In the beginning of Prior's chapter about Cudworth he states:

THE same broad type of moral philosophy as Professor Moore has taught at Cambridge in our own time was also taught there in the seventeenth century by that difficult but rewarding writer Ralph Cudworth. Cudworth is mentioned by Rashdall as anticipating Professor Moore's opinion that 'good is indefinable'; and as we shall see shortly, he defended this opinion by the same bad argument.⁶¹

Prior tells us that Cudworth's primary focus is on the necessity of nature and divine command and that the central tenet to Cudworth's argument is that:

[I]t is impossible to deduce an ethical conclusion from entirely non-ethical premisses. We cannot infer 'We ought to do X' from, for example 'God commands us to do X,' unless this is supplemented by the ethical premiss, 'We ought to do what God commands'; and it is quite useless to offer instead of this some additional non-ethical premiss, such as 'God commands us to obey his commands.'⁶²

For a divine command theorist to offer a supplementary premiss such as that above would be to use an empty tautology because for God's commands to be commands, obedience to them would be inherent in the commands themselves, thus there would be no sense in the statement. If we agree that

it is impossible to deduce an ethical proposition from any entirely non-ethical premisses or set of premisses, then it is impossible to deduce one from a definition, since a definition, if it is properly to be called a proposition at all, is not one about obligations, but one about the meanings of words.⁶³

Thus, even if a naturalist believes he or she can define terms such as good and bad or evil, just and unjust etcetera, he or she would still not be able to use it as a reason why one ought to behave in a particular way. This is because the naturalist holds that ethical terms such as 'good' can be defined by using what Cudworth calls 'natural' properties like 'pleasantness,' since for naturalists 'good' and 'pleasant' are names for the same

⁶¹ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. 13

⁶² *Ibid* pp 18 -19

⁶³ *Ibid* p. 24

quality. Therefore, according to Prior in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, if a naturalist attempts to prove an ethical claim by appealing to the definition of the term ‘good’ then he or she has committed the naturalistic fallacy.

Prior’s primary accusation against Cudworth is that he defends his position by using a bad argument. While in this thesis I will be looking closely at how Cudworth’s view differs from that of Moore, it is important to notice too that Prior accuses them of arguing in the same way. In this section I would like to investigate this further to ascertain exactly what Prior means by this claim. Like Moore, Cudworth also directs his argument at inconsistent naturalists, however, unlike those Moore criticised these hold that ‘good’ can be identified by appealing to obedience to the will – either of God or of a civil sovereign. These inconsistent naturalists also maintain the belief that to obey the will (of God or a sovereign) is good, in other words, we have a significant duty to obey the will of whomever is rightly qualified and invested with lawful authority.⁶⁴

As we have seen, Cudworth was criticising his predecessors such as Hobbes and Descartes among others. Cudworth was alive to their mistake of appealing to the will of the civil sovereign in Hobbes’s case, and for Descartes the will of God. However, it has been argued that Cudworth is mistaken in his own reasoning. Prior illustrates an important point that he thinks threatens to doom Cudworth’s view to a fallacy not unlike the one he (Prior) accuses Moore of falling into. The criticism is that, by maintaining the opinion that things are what they are by nature, Cudworth is holding a trivial belief. If it is true that for a belief to be significant it must be free from truisms or tautological reasoning, then Cudworth’s view may indeed be susceptible to the criticism of triviality.⁶⁵

A tautology is a statement that contains repetitious information that does not add to the knowledge of the subject of the statement. And if we look back on Cudworth’s writing there are plenty of examples to be found. At §813 Cudworth gives the examples “Things are White by Whiteness, and Black by Blackness, Triangular by Triangularity, and Round by Rotundity, Like by Likeness, and Equal by Equality,” these surely

⁶⁴ Ibid p. 13

⁶⁵ This criticism is actually by John Tulloch in *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century*

constitute tautologies. This form of argument – that something is what it is because of the quality it possesses – runs throughout Cudworth’s views. Most importantly it is characteristic of his main point: Things are what they are by their nature. I do not think it would be unreasonable to suggest that Cudworth’s point may indeed be trivial in nature, for if we analyse what it really says, we should find it says very little at all.

...it is Universally true, That things are what they are, not by Will but by Nature.⁶⁶

The question may be asked, does this statement really tell us anything? To state that something is what it is by its nature, seems very true, though if a thing is not what it is by its nature, then how could it be what it is. The point I am endeavouring to express is that this important feature of Cudworth’s discussion is a truism.

If it is the case that the main thread in Cudworth’s argument is a truism, then we must investigate what the consequences are. We must examine whether or not Cudworth’s argument will survive Prior’s attack, or if we will have to concede that Prior has been fair in his judgment that Cudworth has given a bad argument (I will deal with this point in part three). But first I would like to show why Prior accused both Moore and Cudworth of arguing in the same way despite arguing about different things. As we have seen Moore’s aim was to show that the term ‘good’ is an undefinable notion. Moore claims that the term good is unique, and naturalists (and others) who attempt to identify it with any other term are mistaken because “Everything is what it is, and not another thing.” Cudworth is concerned with showing that we may not derive ethical propositions from non-ethical claims, and that problems ensue when one attempts to prove why one ought to do what God or a sovereign commands. Cudworth’s central argument is simply put, as seen above, “Things are what they are, not by Will but by Nature.” Now if we examine these statements side-by-side, we should be able to see a similarity, which is not so apparent in Prior’s arguments:

Moore	Everything is what it is, and not another thing
Cudworth	Things are what they are, not by Will but by Nature

⁶⁶ Cudworth, *A Treatise*, (Selby-Bigge), § 813 p. 247

Both statements, while on the surface look strong and convincing, seem to be susceptible to the charge of triviality. It seems to me that this is the most likely cause of Prior's accusation that Cudworth's arguments are faulty in the same way as the arguments found in Moore's writing. The problem that both the above statements face, is that it seems trivial to assert that things are what they are, or that things are not other things, or that things are only what they are because they are by Nature what they are. What this charge of triviality amounts to, so far, is a connection between Moore and Cudworth that was not entirely obvious from Prior's arguments in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*.

Although initially it may have looked as though Moore and Cudworth were arguing in different ways about different issues – Moore focussing on the mistaken definitions of indefinable terms, and Cudworth being concerned with the impossibility of inferring ethical claims from non-ethical propositions – there is a criticism connecting them. Moreover, it may have seemed as though Prior was being unfair in accusing Moore and Cudworth of arguing badly in the same way, but now that we can see the connection we may have to be more charitable to Prior's claims. However, while it may indeed be the case that Moore and Cudworth's arguments are both susceptible to the charge of triviality, I will devote the next part of this thesis to showing why Prior's arguments with respect to the naturalistic fallacy might appear to involve some confusion. I intend to argue that the criticism of triviality does not necessarily lead either Moore or Cudworth to commit any fallacy, especially not the naturalistic fallacy. There is, as I have noted in earlier sections, a serious controversy about whether in fact the naturalistic fallacy is really a genuine fallacy. As I will try to explain in later sections of this thesis, some of the questions and issues raised in this scholarly controversy might be like warning flags to us and might be seen as indicating that Prior was perhaps confused in his discussions of Moore and Cudworth and in his interpretation of the naturalistic fallacy. In the next part I am going to examine the structure of selected fallacies to show that while it may have been correct for Prior to accuse Moore and Cudworth of triviality, this will not necessarily lead to fallacious reasoning and certainly will not lead to the naturalistic fallacy, because it may not be a true ethical fallacy.

Part Three

Arthur Prior

3.1 Logic and the Basis of Ethics

In this section I would like to clarify certain of Prior's points found in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* with the aim of moving into a discussion about whether or not he has somehow confused the issue of the naturalistic fallacy, particularly with respect to Moore and Cudworth. Prior has divided *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* into five parts, the first of which he calls 'The Naturalistic Fallacy: The Logic of its Refutation,' This part is directed primarily at Moore and is essentially an interpretation by Prior of Moore's main argument. The second part consists of three chapters regarding 'The Autonomy of Ethics' and it is within the first chapter of this part that Prior outlines his arguments in relation to Cudworth. The third part Prior has set as one chapter under the heading 'Promising as Special Creation.' Part four consists of three chapters associated with Propriety and Truth in which Prior discusses a preliminary history, facts and norms and feelings and claims. Lastly, the fifth part is 'The Naturalistic Fallacy: The History of its Refutation.' For present purposes, I will concentrate on part one, part two (chapter one – Cudworth) and part five. It is within these particular parts that Prior spends the most time discussing Moore and Cudworth.

The first task that Prior sets out is to examine the naturalistic fallacy and the logic of its refutation. Prior gives his interpretation of the term naturalistic fallacy as follows:

What Professor Moore means by the 'naturalistic fallacy' is the assumption that because some quality or combination of qualities invariably and necessarily accompanies the quality of goodness, or is invariably and necessarily accompanied by it, or both, this quality or combination of qualities is *identical* with goodness.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p.1

He goes on to propose that

The naturalistic fallacy is the assumption that because the words 'good' and, say, 'pleasant' necessarily describe the same objects, they must attribute the same quality to them...What the man who commits the naturalistic fallacy fails to realize is that 'good' and some other adjective may denote or be applicable to the same things, and yet not connote the same quality, i.e. describe the things in the same way.⁶⁸

Prior claims that from a consideration of the points made in the extracts above, Moore's aim was then to "show that the term 'good' is incapable of definition. By definition he means the exhibition of a quality referred to by some term as a combination of simpler qualities."⁶⁹ In essence, Prior's interpretation of Moore's argument is, put simply, that one who attempts to argue that the term 'good' is identical with words such as 'pleasant' or any natural qualities will commit the naturalistic fallacy, because the word 'good' cannot be reduced to a simpler definition.

In a review of Prior's book, Charner Perry describes it by saying:

This short essay has an avowed purpose and rather odd conclusion, the purpose being to determine whether "purely logical considerations" can settle the issue between the naturalists and nonnaturalists. The conclusion is that the controversy cannot be so settled.⁷⁰

Perry goes on to note, "However Prior's conclusions be interpreted they seem odd and curious; and they seem moreover to confuse thoroughly the issues which he sets out to clarify."⁷¹ Almost the opposite view to Perry's can be found within two other reviews. In one P. F. Strawson states "Mr. Prior has written, with lucid economy, the history of an inconsistency in theorizing about ethics."⁷² In another C. F.⁷³ asserts, "Mr Prior is an unassuming and lucid writer, and the brevity of the book, far from being a disadvantage, helps considerably in focussing the issues sharply."⁷⁴ The responses to Prior's book are

⁶⁸ Ibid pp 1-2

⁶⁹ Ibid p. 2

⁷⁰ Perry, 'Review: [Untitled] Reviewed work(s): *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*,' in *Ethics*, p. 70

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Strawson, P. F. 'Review: [Untitled] Reviewed work(s): *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*,' in *Ethics*, Vol. 26, No. 98. (Jul., 1951), p. 270

⁷³ C. F. is all that is given for a name.

⁷⁴ C. F. 'Review: [Untitled] Reviewed work(s): *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*,' in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 48, No. 9. (Apr. 26, 1951), p. 310

by no means unanimous and one crucial point of discussion is whether Prior is lucid, or whether he is simply confused.

Prior's own goal, as he tells us, is not to settle any disputes but to clarify the issues surrounding them. One of the devices he employs in the first few parts of his book is the distinction between the naturalists and non-naturalists. He writes in the introduction that the book is "not directed against naturalism as such – I have attempted here to consider the issue purely as a logician, and to suggest to both sides how their positions may be freed from logical faults."⁷⁵ The distinction seems to be forgotten or omitted in the later part of the book, and my sense is that his arguments would be far easier to follow if he had made the distinction apparent throughout. The distinction between the two parties (three if one counts the inconsistent naturalists as a separate party) is important, especially to the fundamental issue underlying the *need* (as Prior sees it) for *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, which is that the naturalistic fallacy happens, it happens in every century and it is something that philosophers ought to be aware of and attempt to avoid.

The first trouble that one encounters by picking up *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* is in trying to uncover exactly what Prior is setting out to show us. It is one thing to simply say that Prior intended to clarify the issues surrounding the fact that, at times, we all describe conduct and character by using ethical terms such as 'good,' 'bad,' 'right,' 'wrong,' 'evil' etcetera. It is another thing to actually be able to determine what this really means. As I said above, the first and last parts of Prior's study are said to be concerned specifically with the naturalistic fallacy, which seems to be a familiar current running throughout the book. I will show that contrary to C. F.'s opinion, the brevity of the book is indeed a disadvantage, and given the lack of depth in certain areas it seems as though he may be confused in his interpretations of Moore and Cudworth. Part of what makes Prior's project less clear than it might have been is in no small way due to the fact that he does not give a *detailed* description of the naturalistic fallacy. I believe it is critical to examine this matter further.

⁷⁵ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. vii-viii

3.2 Implications of Prior's Arguments

- Aristotle's Division of Categories of Enquiry

At the beginning of this thesis I suggested that perhaps Prior's main aim in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* was to remind us that we really ought not to confuse the spheres of enquiry that Aristotle distinguishes in his *Topics*. Prior makes a brief comment about this point and gives little more than a paragraph to discuss it. I will now investigate what Prior may have been alluding to by referring to Aristotle's division of categories. First I will begin by doing what Prior failed to do, and that is give the quote from the source, only then will we be able to see what the implications of this claim might be:

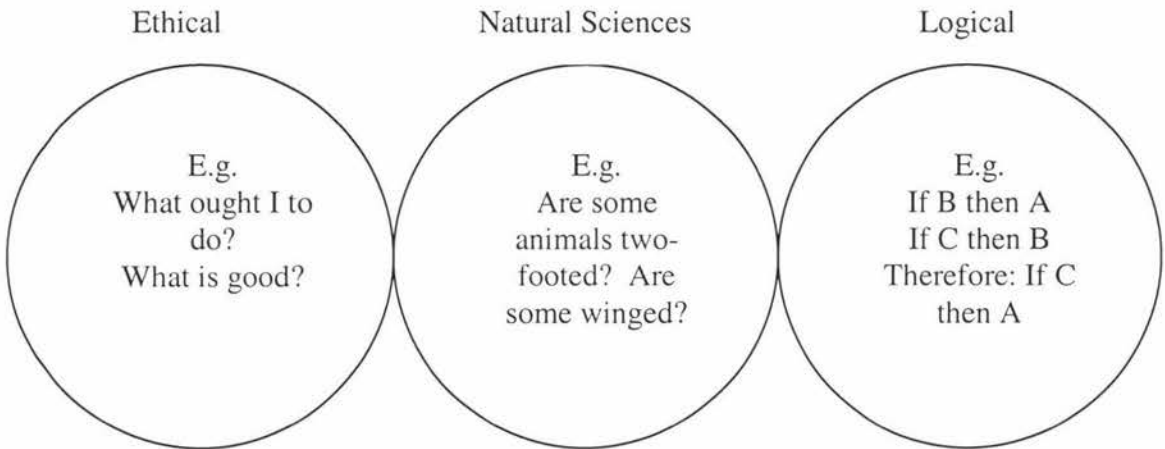
105b19-29 Of propositions and problems there are – to comprehend the matter in outline – three divisions; for some are ethical propositions, some are on natural sciences, while some are logical. Propositions such as the following are ethical, e.g. 'Ought one rather to obey one's parents or the laws, if they disagree?'; such as this are logical, e.g. 'Is the knowledge of opposites the same or not?'; while such as this are on natural science, e.g. 'Is the universe eternal or not?' Likewise also with problems. The nature of each of the aforesaid kinds of proposition is not easily rendered in a definition, but we have to try to recognize each of them by means of the familiarity attained through induction, examining them in the light of the illustrations given above.⁷⁶

In this extract from *Topics*, Aristotle divides the areas of enquiry into three: ethical, natural sciences, and logical. He explains that none of them are 'definable' and that the way by which we may come to know if an enquiry belongs to the ethical rather than logical, or natural rather than ethical, and so on, is through studying examples. If the question takes the form "Ought one to do this or that?" the 'ought' indicates it belongs in the ethical sphere, while a question concerning the nature of the universe would reside in the sphere of natural sciences, and logical questions would pertain to methods and/or principles of reasoning. As said above, I suggested in the introduction that Prior's goal was to make us aware that these categories exist and we must not rely on

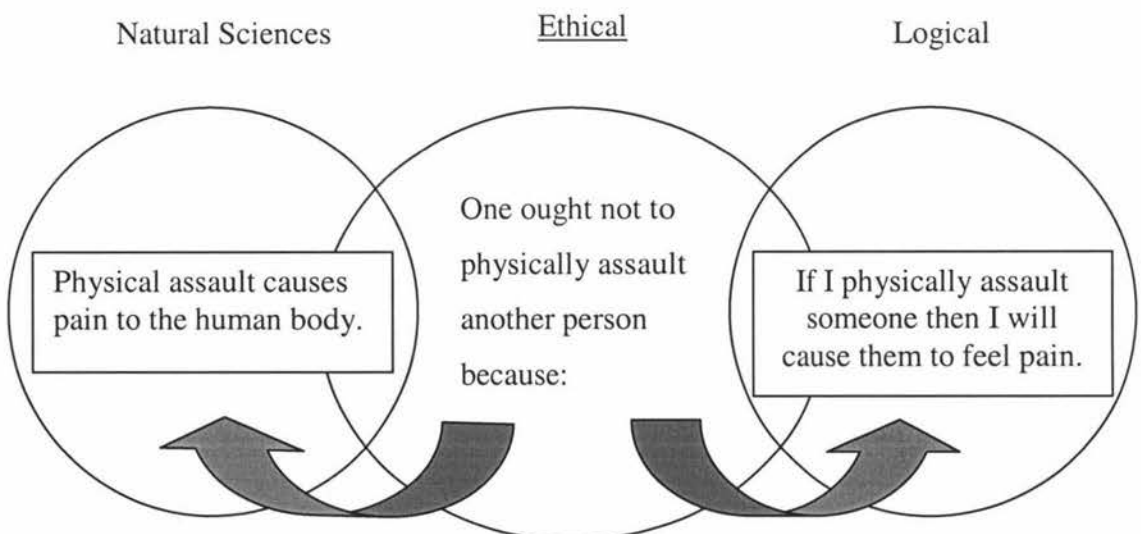
⁷⁶ Aristotle, *Topics*, from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, the revised Oxford translation, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Vol. 1, Bollingen Series LXXI · 2, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp 175-176

the tools of one category to resolve the problems of another. However, there are two ways of interpreting Prior's reason for using Aristotle's division of categories. First is that Prior was indicating that one should not merge the categories at all, or second, that one cannot settle problems in one category by relying *entirely* on tools found within the other spheres.

To help clarify this, consider the following diagram:



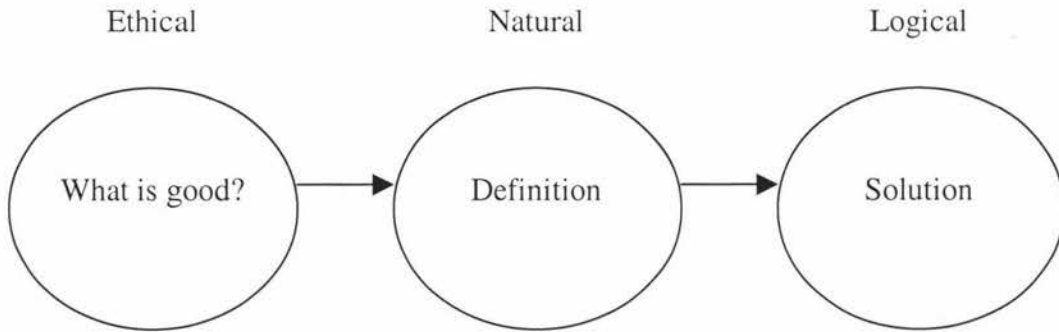
If the first interpretation were correct it would mean that there would be no connection at all between any of the spheres. This is a problem because for us to come to have knowledge of anything found within these spheres, we must be able to implement tools we have learnt from each other sphere. In other words, to be able to know, say, that the ethical proposition "One ought not to physically assault another person" is true, you would first have to know certain things from the other spheres. You would have to know that physical assault causes pain, and you would have to be capable of reasoning that if you assaulted someone that person would then be in pain. Thus the categories must be connected:



I am inclined to think that what Prior was getting at is that in some cases, particularly in regard to ethics, we do need to connect the spheres, however we cannot make the mistake of having an ethical problem and leaving the solution up to another sphere:



Or even worse, confusing all three



It seems as though Prior may simply be trying to point out that naturalists are guilty of attempting to resolve the ethical problem of defining the term 'good' by first giving it a definition in non-ethical (or natural) terms, and then leaving it to the logicians to give a solution. And when one looks at this criticism against the naturalists, it is easy to see that there seems to be a problem. It is one thing to use knowledge from all three spheres to resolve a problem, but it would be a mistake to expect a *purely* natural or logical solution to an ethical dilemma. However, if someone were to make this mistake are they then guilty of the naturalistic fallacy? In the next section I will look at the implications the naturalistic fallacy might have on the state of ethics, and then I will investigate, assuming Prior is correct in his arguments regarding the naturalistic fallacy, how old the naturalistic fallacy would be.

- The State of Ethics and the Age of the Naturalistic Fallacy

As we know, Prior tells us that one of his aims is to clarify the issues surrounding the fact that we all use words like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to describe conduct and character, but in his clarification he makes a very bold claim. This claim is that both naturalists *and* non-naturalists are guilty of committing either the naturalistic fallacy or something very much like it. One of the worries about this claim is, what becomes of the study of Ethics if those who attempt to define ‘good’ in a certain way (the most important way, which is finding the nature of ‘good’) commit a fallacy? Frankena describes Ethics as “a branch of philosophy; it is *moral philosophy* or philosophical thinking about morality, moral problems, and moral judgments.”⁷⁷ But how can we study morality if we cannot come to know, in the most important way, how to define ‘good’?

Prior’s claim seems too wide reaching and it makes one wonder how it is that so many philosophers could possibly all be committing the same fallacy (or other very similar fallacies) while each having very different theories. It also raises the question, if so many philosophers really are making this mistake – remember Prior wants us to believe that this mistake is so common that identifying it is as tedious as shaving or lawn mowing – then how old is the naturalistic fallacy? Although this question is only a tangent to my main aim, I have included it with good reason. If it is true, as Prior suggests, that exposing fallacious ethical reasoning, such as identifying the naturalistic fallacy, is a task that must be performed anew in every age, then should we not consider the possibility that the naturalistic fallacy was committed by those even further back that Prior looks? Cudworth is the earliest philosopher Prior discusses, but what of those (similarly misguided) philosophers in ages before the seventeenth century? In section two I gave an extract from Plato’s dialogue the *Euthyphro* in which we saw a similar difficulty about attempts to define the term ‘pious.’ In other early dialogues such as the *Charmides* Socrates speaks of the term ‘good’ in reference to the question ‘What is temperance?’ Would Prior have argued that the naturalistic fallacy was present in Plato’s writings? Perhaps; perhaps not. Either way the thought is disturbing because it stands to reason that if the naturalistic fallacy began happening at least in Plato’s writing and that it happens in every age, then it makes one worry about the state of Ethics. To make any progress in Ethics one must be able to develop theories with respect to what is moral, and, to be able to continue, one would have to be able to

⁷⁷ Frankena, (1973) *Ethics*, (2nd edn.), Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., p. 4

discuss and define the term ‘good.’ It is of course true that fallacies exist and are such that they should be avoided, however, given the questionable nature of the naturalistic fallacy, there is a greater burden on Prior to explain its nature very precisely and unambiguously than Prior himself seems to think there is. Otherwise – that is without a clear explanation – it just seems too swift of Prior to accuse so many of making this mistake while not considering how far his accusations would reach. I have included this discussion as evidence toward my argument that Prior’s account of fallacies was either incomplete or even confused. There does seem to be a case for confusion, and setting that evidence and argument out is the aim of much of what follows.

3.3 Selected Fallacies and other Arguments

- The ‘Is-Ought’ Problem

The naturalistic fallacy is often confused with the problem of deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’ and in this section I am going to show why this problem is not the same as Moore’s account of the naturalistic fallacy. I believe that while it is important to examine what the naturalistic fallacy is, it is just as important to discover what it is not. The origin of the ‘Is-Ought’ problem can be traced back to David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, so let us consider the source of the issue:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ‘tis the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention wou’d subvert all the vulgar systems of

morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason.⁷⁸

In his article 'Hume on "Is" and "Ought",' A. C. MacIntyre states:

The standard interpretation of this passage takes Hume to be asserting here that no set of non-moral premises can entail a moral conclusion. It is further concluded that Hume therefore is a prime opponent of what [Arthur] Prior has called the "attempt to find a 'foundation' for morality that is not already moral."⁷⁹

Before we move on, it is important to understand what the 'Is-Ought' problem actually is.

Simply put, this mistake is said to occur when one attempts to pass from a fact to a moral (or ethical) statement.

['Is' statement/ Fact]	My mother gave me life and raised me
	Therefore,
['Ought' statement/ Ethical]	I <u>ought</u> to obey my mother's wishes

The problem arises because the 'ought,' which indicates some sort of obligation with regard to duty, does not appear in the factual premise but does (of a sudden) in the ethical conclusion. From the discussion of the Open Question Argument in part one it should be evident that it will be justifiable to ask why we 'ought' to do something when given a premise (or set of premises) that does not itself contain an ought. If a premise, which contains an ought were given then a conclusion containing an ought might logically follow:

[Fact]	I <u>ought</u> to obey my mother's wishes
↓	
[Ethical]	My mother wishes that I would learn another language so I <u>ought</u> to learn another language.

⁷⁸ Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, i, I, in the (1978) publication, Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, pp 469-470

⁷⁹ MacIntyre, A. C. 'Hume on "Is" and "Ought"' in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 68, No. 4. (Oct., 1959), p. 452

However, even in this form a problem arises, which is that the premise needs substantiating before it can be used to support the conclusion. Thus it would be justifiable to ask ‘Why ought I...?’

In his article ‘Moore and ‘Is-Ought,’ William H. Bruening looks at the question of whether or not the ‘Is-Ought’ problem is really an instance of Moore’s naturalistic fallacy. His aim is to show that the two are not the same. He explains what might be the reason behind the confusion of the two:

One reason why Moore might be interpreted as making the naturalistic fallacy correspond to the “is-ought” problem is the fact that much of his denial of the distinction between factual statements and evaluative statements occurs in the latter chapters of *Principia Ethica* and in the Schilpp volume. Often the first chapter of *Principia Ethica* is reprinted in isolation from Moore’s other views on the subject; this may lead some to think that the naturalistic fallacy and the “is-ought” problem are really saying the same thing. There are a few clues in the first chapter that this is not correct; and, if the previous discussion is correct, the latter chapters definitely show that the two doctrines are not the same.⁸⁰

He also gives this conclusion:

Moore’s naturalistic fallacy is not the same thing as the “is-ought” problem. He is not saying that evaluative statements are not factual. Quite the contrary, he seems to speak in such a way as to deny the distinction between factual statements and evaluative statements as it is made today. For him, some (if not all) judgments of value are factual, and this is a clear denial of the distinctions commonly interpreted.⁸¹

Although Bruening’s arguments in these two quotes seem quite complex, what he is getting at is just this: when Moore accused others of committing the naturalistic fallacy, he was not directing his attack against those who attempt to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is.’ According to Bruening, the reason Moore would not have considered this a case of the naturalistic fallacy was because for him facts do have intrinsic value, and “if statements about intrinsic value are factual and statements about rights and duties depend on the notion of intrinsic value, it would only seem correct to conclude that

⁸⁰ Bruening, W. H. ‘Moore and “is-Ought,”’ in *Ethics*, Vol. 81, No. 2. (Jan., 1971), p. 149

⁸¹ *Ibid* p. 148

statements about rights and duties are factual statements for Moore.”⁸² So, if Bruening is right, Moore would have considered the move from a fact to an ethical conclusion as logically possible and would not have accused anyone who argued in this way of committing the naturalistic fallacy. This account of the ‘Is-Ought’ problem helps to differentiate between two problems, which are (1) the issue of identity, meaning the problem of mistakenly identifying two different terms as being the same ($X=X$); and (2) deducing an ethical proposition from non-ethical premises (or attempting to derive an ‘ought’ or ‘value’ statement from an ‘is’ or ‘factual’ statement). The distinction between these two problems will become clearer in the following section.

- Prior’s Fallacies

In this section I will show how Prior treats not only the so-called naturalistic fallacy but also others he considers similar to it, very loosely. I will show that his treatment is more confusing than it needs to be and I will go on to explain different fallacies, in particular the definist fallacy, using the work of Frankena to give clarity to the discussion. But first consider the following from Prior:

THE tendency to fall into fallacious modes of reasoning is rather like an epidemic that breaks out during a war. It strikes one side first, giving a temporary advantage to the other; but it has a way of drifting across the line of battle and infecting those who formerly had the satisfaction of being free from it. This fact is illustrated, even quite dramatically, by the history, after Cudworth, of the fallacious claim to deduce ethical conclusions from non-ethical premisses.⁸³

This quote, and one we saw earlier, in which Prior likened the task of exposing fallacious ethical arguments to housekeeping, lawn mowing, and shaving, seems to constitute his attitude toward fallacies. It is as if he takes for granted that fallacies, like the naturalistic fallacy, happen and nothing more need be said, especially to the contrary, and no explanation is needed about exactly why they occur. Prior makes note of W. K. Frankena’s *Mind* article ‘The Naturalistic Fallacy’ but strangely does not find it necessary to comment on the very real possibility that the naturalistic fallacy may not be a genuine fallacy. In this section I would like to clearly outline the different

⁸² Ibid p. 148

⁸³ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. 26

'fallacies' at play in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, and we shall soon see how these differ from those outlined in Frankena's article.

The following is a list describing fallacies that Prior specifically mentions in his book:

1. The naturalistic fallacy – this is the first and most widely covered in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*. This fallacy is the primary topic for the first and last studies. As we saw in part one of this thesis Prior describes the naturalistic fallacy in terms of Moore's account, specifically it is "the assumption that because the words 'good' and, say, 'pleasant' describe the same objects, they must attribute the same quality to them."⁸⁴ To put this more simply, Prior says

If...it is believed that whatever is pleasant is and must be good, or that what is good is and must be pleasant, or both, it is committing the naturalistic fallacy to infer from this that goodness and pleasantness are one and the same quality.⁸⁵

What Prior seems to be saying is that the naturalistic fallacy occurs when one infers from the coextensiveness of good and pleasant that goodness and pleasantness are taken to be the same. Prior's account of the naturalistic fallacy is drawn from Moore, but Prior also accused Moore of falling into a 'fallacy not unlike it.'⁸⁶

2. Deducing ethical conclusions from definitions – in his last study in the book, 'The Naturalistic Fallacy: The history of its refutation' Prior states:

We have seen that the claim to infer significant ethical propositions from definitions of ethical terms, which appears to constitute the essence of what Professor Moore calls the naturalistic fallacy, is a special case of a more general claim, namely, the claim to deduce ethical propositions from ones which are admitted to be non-ethical.⁸⁷

This quote seems to suggest the 'Is-Ought' problem rather than the problem of mistakenly inferring the identity of good and pleasant. So, here we begin to see

⁸⁴ Ibid p. 1

⁸⁵ Ibid p. 1

⁸⁶ Ibid p. 12

⁸⁷ Ibid p. 93

that Prior really does consider these two different problems as cases that lead to the naturalistic fallacy (or something like it).

3. Deducing ethical conclusions from non-ethical premises – this is another form of fallacious reasoning that can be found in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, it is this form that is mentioned in the quote given at the beginning of this subsection (on p. 53). In the quote Prior claims that this form of fallacy is found specifically in the history after Cudworth. This mistake (coupled with essentialism, which is discussed below) is the one Prior accuses Cudworth himself of making.
4. The fallacy of *essentialism* – when describing objects as ‘good’ there is a tendency to speak in terms of things being good by nature. Prior expands this:

The phrase ‘good by nature’ has also caused confusion through the conflict between tendencies to identify it, and tendencies not to identify it, with ‘good by definition’. I think this double use of ‘good by nature’ – to mean ‘good by definition’, and at the same time something more than this – is an instance of the fallacy which Dr. Popper calls ‘essentialism’. Here the chief offenders have not been Hobbes and his followers, but Cudworth and his.⁸⁸

The theory of essentialism is that the nature of things is essential or necessary to those things. One can come to have intuitions about the nature of things and one can express these intuitions by giving definitions, which will be considered true knowledge.⁸⁹

What we have just seen is Prior’s account of certain fallacies, and instances he believed led to committing the naturalistic fallacy (or something not unlike it). By isolating these passages something crucial has been highlighted, that is:

- Some of the instances Prior believed led to committing the naturalistic fallacy are problems about the definability or indefinability of terms; and
- Some of the instances look very much like the ‘Is-Ought’ problem, i.e. attempting to deduce ethical propositions from non-ethical premises

⁸⁸ Ibid p. 27

⁸⁹ The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy

It seems as if Prior does not always have a clear enough idea of these as two separate problems, which might be a reason why Prior's discussions are less lucid that we would like. This also might account for the lack of clarity with regard to the relation between the naturalist/non-naturalist debate and the naturalistic fallacy.

In his review Charner Perry writes:

[Prior's] case seems to rest on two contentions. (i) One is that a doctrine whose denial is inconsistent is trivial and insignificant. A significant ethical theory must contradict a significant doctrine and a logically inconsistent doctrine is not significant. (ii) The second is that an ethical premise is necessary for the derivation of an ethical conclusion.⁹⁰

(i) This point was one discussed earlier in part one, essentially this constitutes Prior's criticism of Moore. Prior's argument was that for Moore's ethical theory to be significant Moore would have needed to construct the opposing theory (naturalism) in a significant way, otherwise his refutation of it would be trivial. (ii) The next point made in the extract above seems to be Prior's interpretation of Cudworth's argument, which is that an ethical claim cannot be inferred from a non-ethical premise or set of premises.

Although Prior accuses both Moore and Cudworth of arguing badly in the same way, he does recognise the difference between (i) and (ii). In the last study in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, as we saw in the last quote on p. 54 he suggests that deducing significant ethical propositions from definitions, although it appears to be a case of Moore's naturalistic fallacy, is actually a case of a more general fallacious claim – which is to deduce ethical propositions from non-ethical premises (and it should be remembered that this general fallacious claim was later retracted by Prior).

We can see from this extract that Prior was aware of the distinction between the two arguments, however it seems to be a point that is down-played more than it ought to be. Throughout Prior's book he gives example after example of arguments he claims commit the naturalistic fallacy. He does give hints here and there to suggest that not all actually fall into the naturalistic fallacy *per se*, for example, at the end of chapter one he

⁹⁰ Perry, '[Untitled] Reviewed work(s): *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*,' p. 71

retorts that Moore has himself fallen into a fallacy not unlike the naturalistic fallacy, and at the beginning of chapter two he suggests that although Cudworth's argument is not exactly the same as Moore's it is still worth considering. The problem is that by placing discussions of other fallacies in amongst an overall discussion of the naturalistic fallacy, it can be difficult for a reader to distinguish between the various subtle differences. It also becomes increasingly challenging to maintain the author's intentions in one's mind, which makes it difficult to assess the merit of his arguments.

3.4 Frankena and the Naturalistic Fallacy

In his article 'Opening Questions, Following Rules' Paul Bloomfield writes:

We can begin with the 'naturalistic fallacy' and dispatch with it quickly enough. All that is truly required for this is to cite Frankena's 'The Naturalistic Fallacy'...⁹¹

Frankena's arguments in his 1939 article 'The Naturalistic Fallacy' suggest that Prior's account of fallacies is confused, and that this confusion is about something so central as whether the so-called naturalistic fallacy is a fallacy. So, in this section I will be using Frankena's article to more closely investigate the structure of the naturalistic fallacy.

I intend to show that while Prior's initial criticism of triviality against Moore and Cudworth may be correct, his arguments regarding the fallacies, in particular the naturalistic fallacy, are at best incomplete. The status of the naturalistic fallacy as a genuine fallacy, and a genuine worry for ethicists, is questionable and has led to much conjecture and debate.⁹² I will put forward an argument to support the view that it is not really damaging to Ethics, and if it must be used it will adhere to certain stipulations so as not to give it the weight it has previously been given. I will then investigate how this affects Prior's arguments with regard to Moore and Cudworth, and as a whole.

⁹¹ Bloomfield, P. 'Opening Questions, Following Rules' in *Metaphysics after Moore*, p. 172

⁹² I am aware of many others who have written on the naturalistic fallacy and that it is still a debateable topic. However, for the purposes of displaying a weakness by Prior in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* I will limit my discussion to Frankena's article, which I believe makes the relevant points.

Following on from the quote above Paul Bloomfield says this about the naturalistic fallacy:

In his *Principia*, Moore, of course, recognized that the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ never really had anything special to do with naturalism, as he applied it to metaphysical, as well as to natural, definitions of ‘good’. We learn from C. Lewy (1964) that as early as 1921, Moore saw that there was no real fallacy involved, insofar as fallacies require inferences and Moore thought that those who committed the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ were merely confused.⁹³

I am going to examine the claim in this quote – that the naturalistic fallacy is not really a fallacy but is actually just a confusion. To begin let us delve into the work of Frankena. In his article ‘The Naturalistic Fallacy,’ he states:

One of the points I wish to make in this paper is that the charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy can be made, if at all, only as a conclusion from the discussion and not as an instrument of deciding it.⁹⁴

Frankena, here, is referring to the tendency of non-naturalists, specifically *intuitionists*, to use the naturalistic fallacy as a weapon. They are quick to draw it out as if it were a sword to cast down their opponents. However, this is a hasty move. They argue that any and all who attempt to define ‘good’ in natural terms commit this fallacy, but Frankena claims that the naturalistic fallacy should not be used in such a manner, he asserts:

In this aspect, the naturalistic fallacy must be proved to be a fallacy. It cannot be used to settle the controversy, but can only be asserted to be a fallacy when the smoke of battle has cleared.⁹⁵

In other words, the non-naturalists (or intuitionists as Frankena calls them) make the mistake of putting the cart before the horse. They go on the attack before fully solidifying their weapon as something guaranteed to win them the fight. The naturalistic fallacy must first be proved to be a fallacy for it to be a serious threat to naturalism or any other doctrine, and, as we will soon see this is easier said than done.

⁹³ Bloomfield, P. ‘Opening Questions, Following Rules,’ p. 172-173

⁹⁴ Frankena, W. K. ‘The Naturalistic Fallacy,’ in *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 48, No. 192 (Oct., 1931), p. 465

⁹⁵ *Ibid*

Something that Frankena did particularly well in his article, which Moore and Prior did not, was to clearly distinguish between the different fallacies at play. We have seen in the first two parts of this thesis that it is unclear how two different theories – Moore’s and Cudworth’s – could both be accused of making the same mistake. We saw that the charge of triviality is one we can reasonably uphold. However, Prior was not clear enough in his treatment of fallacies to be convincing in his accusations that Moore and Cudworth committed ones not unlike the naturalistic fallacy. At this stage I think it is important to outline the different fallacies in the style of Frankena (and using the names Frankena gives them) so as to gain a clearer idea of what Prior may have been getting at.

1. The factualist/valuational fallacy is the procedure of deducing an ethical proposition from non-ethical ones. “Moore sometimes seems to identify [this mistake] with the naturalistic fallacy, but in the main he holds only that it involves, implies, or rests upon this fallacy.”⁹⁶
2. The metaphysical fallacy is the first one that Frankena mentions (in his discussion of the distinction between the different fallacies). He states that this fallacy occurs “when one confuses ‘good’, which is not a metaphysical object or quality, with any metaphysical object or quality, as metaphysical moralists do.”⁹⁷
3. The naturalistic fallacy, he claims, is a “species or form” of the definist fallacy. Frankena explains, that the naturalistic fallacy is not said to be a fallacy “because it is natural or confuses a non-natural quality with a natural one, but solely because it involves the definist fallacy.”⁹⁸
4. The definist fallacy is said to underlie the naturalistic fallacy. Frankena says that “the definist fallacy is the process of confusing or identifying two

⁹⁶ Ibid p. 468

⁹⁷ Ibid p. 470

⁹⁸ Ibid p. 471

properties, of defining one property by another, or of substituting one property for another.”⁹⁹

This list of fallacies suggests that mistakes have been made with regard to the naturalistic fallacy. The first mistake is in relation to (1): it is possible to formulate an argument that has facts as the premises; in doing so, one would not be committing the naturalistic fallacy because the argument may have nothing whatever related to what is natural. The mistake would be to draw an ethical conclusion from those facts. The next mistake occurs when we speak of defining the ethical term ‘good’ by identifying it with a non-ethical term such as pleasant. It is a mistake to call this the naturalistic fallacy; really it should have been named the definist theory, as the fallaciousness involved arises out of the *defining* of the term, not because it involves anything naturalistic. Thus, regardless of whether or not the naturalistic fallacy is a genuine fallacy, there has been at least one mistake in terms of what *sort* of fallacy it would be. Now that we have more precise descriptions of all these different fallacies we can move forward looking more so at the definist fallacy, as it is this that underlies the so-called ‘naturalistic fallacy.’

- The Definist Fallacy

As said above, the definist fallacy can be said to occur when one identifies one property with another. Similarly, it can occur when a definist treats two different properties as if they were one. This *mistake* (if it is a true mistake), Frankena tells us, can occur regardless of whether the terms involved are natural or not. Thus, it would be incorrect to classify this as a case of the naturalistic fallacy. Frankena says of the definist fallacy:

This formulation of the definist fallacy explains or reflects the motto of *Principia Ethica*, borrowed from Bishop Butler: “Everything is what it is, and not another thing”. It follows from this motto that goodness is what it is and not another thing. It follows that views which try to identify it with something else are making a mistake of an elementary sort. For it *is* a mistake to confuse or identify two properties. If the properties really are two, then they simply are not

⁹⁹ Ibid p. 471

identical. [The important question then is] But do those who define ethical notions in non-ethical terms make this mistake?¹⁰⁰

It seems that when a *definist* (naturalist or not) defines the word 'good' in terms of 'pleasant,' or 'desired' they are not suggesting that there are *two* properties involved. Rather, there is one property that both words have in common, in other words, the terms 'good' and 'pleasant' denote the same property. The definist might argue both that good is what it is, and it is pleasant (or desired or conducive to survival); because even if good is pleasant it is still what it is. Relating to this point, Frankena states:

The motto of *Principia Ethica* is a tautology, and should be expanded as follows: Everything is what it is, and not another thing, unless it is another thing, and even then it is what it is.¹⁰¹

He goes on to point out a criticism not unlike that of Rosati, which we saw in *I.6 Criticisms of the Open Question Argument*. In that section I outlined the criticism that if the Open Question Argument shows anything it shows too much. Frankena says something very similar regarding the definist fallacy.

On the other hand, if Mr. Moore's motto (or the definist fallacy) rules out any definitions, for example of 'good', then it rules out all definitions of any term whatever. To be effective at all, it must be understood to mean, "Every term means what it means, and not what is meant by any other term". Mr. Moore seems implicitly to understand his motto in this way in Section 13, for he proceeds as if 'good' has no meaning, if it has no unique meaning. If the motto be taken in this way, it will follow that 'good' is an indefinable term, since no synonyms can be found. But it will also follow that no term is definable. And then the method of analysis is as useless as an English butcher in a world without sheep.¹⁰²

Frankena admits that it would indeed be a mistake to attempt to define indefinable terms, however, the question becomes: which terms (or 'qualities' in Frankena's words) are indefinable? This, here, is the root of the problem we saw earlier that affects the use of the naturalistic fallacy. More specifically it is that 'good' (or any other term that may be the topic of conversation) must first be proved to be indefinable *before* the definist fallacy can be used as a weapon in an argument. Moreover, the intuitionists

¹⁰⁰ Ibid p. 472

¹⁰¹ Ibid p. 472

¹⁰² Ibid p. 472-473

must show, like the non-naturalists with the naturalistic fallacy, that the definist fallacy is actually a fallacy before implementing it as their main attack against the definists (or naturalists, or whomever). Thus it could only be used at the end of the controversy and not as a beginning point.

Basically the main contention between the *definists* (naturalists and others) and the *intuitionists* (non-naturalists) is that the definists “are all holding that certain propositions involving ethical terms are analytic, tautologous, or true by definition.” The intuitionists, on the other hand, “hold that such statements are synthetic.”¹⁰³ Even more simply, definists believe that when they give a definition of the term ‘good’ there is only one property or characteristic involved, where the intuitionists believe there are two. There is one last extract from Frankena’s ‘The Naturalistic Fallacy’ that I believe is important to include.

If the definists may be taken at their word, then they are not actually confusing two characteristics with each other, nor defining an indefinable characteristic, nor confusing definitions and universal synthetic propositions – in short they are not committing the naturalistic or definist fallacy in any of the interpretations given above. Then the only fallacy which they commit – the real naturalistic or definist fallacy – is the failure to descry the qualities and relations which are central to morality. But this is neither a logical fallacy nor a logical confusion. It is not even, properly speaking, an error.¹⁰⁴

If the dispute is about whether or not ‘good’ is *definable*, then there is a philosophical disagreement between the two sides. But that in itself does not establish that definists or naturalists are guilty of fallacious reasoning, or of logical confusion, or of simple error. To disagree about whether or not ‘good’ is definable is to disagree about a matter of fact. In order to charge someone with a fallacy we need to establish that they are not adhering to principles of good *reasoning*. Prior clearly does think that there is evidence of serious fallacies – or at least evidence of the naturalistic fallacy or something not unlike it. In the next part I will look closely at exactly what Prior said, what he argued, how he connected Moore and Cudworth, and how he dealt with the naturalistic fallacy.

¹⁰³ Ibid p. 474

¹⁰⁴ Ibid p. 475

Part Four

Prior: Connecting Moore and Cudworth

4.1 Textual Data

At this stage it would be understandable for the reader to be wondering just what all of the information accumulated so far in this thesis adds up to. We have considered a lot of necessary background information, and in this part I want to try to bring it all together to show the connection between Moore and Cudworth's philosophies and Prior's *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*. In order to do so I propose to return to a close and detailed analysis of Prior's text. It should be remembered that the intention of this thesis is to show that what appears to be a confusion in Prior affects his arguments regarding Moore and Cudworth, and by extension others he accuses of making the same mistakes. Here I will provide the passages from Prior's book that almost wholly constitute his arguments connecting Moore and Cudworth. Some of the passages are lengthy and may seem rather disjointed but using them in their entirety is necessary for two purposes, (1) it shows the complexity found in Prior's writing, a complexity which perhaps serves to mask some confusion, and (2) it provides the evidence needed in order to evaluate Prior's achievement. Another crucial point that must be kept in mind is that while Prior does not actually accuse Moore or Cudworth of committing the naturalistic fallacy *per se* he does directly accuse Moore of falling into a trap not unlike it, and Cudworth of defending his opinions by the 'same bad argument' as Moore. The 'ins and outs' of Prior's discussion needs close examination and I gave evidence in parts one and two to show how very different Moore and Cudworth's arguments are. I did discover one link, which was that both arguments seem to rest on a truism; however, in part three I showed that this does not necessarily lead to fallacious reasoning. In the passages that will be considered, Prior seems to take it as obvious that Moore and Cudworth both make mistakes that do lead to fallacious reasoning, I will attempt to show why this is a suspicious assumption.

The first piece of text I will examine comes at the beginning of Prior's chapter on 'The Autonomy of Ethics,' which focuses on Cudworth. This is the first time in the book that Moore's philosophy is linked with that of Cudworth (we have seen the first part of this quote earlier, but here it is set out in its entirety):

1. THE same broad type of moral philosophy as Professor Moore has taught at Cambridge in our own time was also taught there in the seventeenth century by that difficult but rewarding writer Ralph Cudworth. (i) Cudworth is mentioned by Rashdall as anticipating Professor Moore's opinion that 'good' is indefinable'; and, as we shall see shortly, (ii) he defended this opinion by the same bad argument. But like Professor Moore he also had a good argument against the ethical naturalists who could not be quite consistent; (iii) and though it was not quite the same argument as Professor Moore's, it is equally worthy of our attention, and we shall accordingly study it, indicating in later studies how it was developed by later and clearer writers.

(iv) The inconsistent ethical naturalism which Cudworth criticized took the form of an identification of goodness or rightness (as I already indicated, it is not necessary for my present purpose to distinguish sharply between these) with obedience to someone's will – the civil sovereign's or God's – coupled with an insistence, as if it were an insistence on something of the first importance, that to obey this person is good or right, and to disobey him bad or wrong – an insistence, in short, that we have in some significant sense of duty to obey him.¹⁰⁵

In this extract we can see two important claims: first (ii) is the place where Prior tells us that Cudworth used the same bad argument as Moore as a defence for his opinion, and second (iii) is where we are told that Moore and Cudworth's good arguments are not the same. Already it is apparent that although Moore and Cudworth's arguments are different, Prior treats them the same in one respect, which is concerning how they defend the position that 'good is indefinable.' In part one of this thesis we saw that Moore's argument for the indefinability of 'good' was that it is a simple notion, like the colour yellow, and cannot sufficiently be defined in the most important way, which is to find the nature of the term. In part two we saw that Cudworth was trying to prove that there is a problem in the reasoning of those who hold both that what God commands is good, and for one to do what is good one ought to follow God commands. Cudworth does not explicitly state that good is indefinable, certainly not in the way Moore does, however, Cudworth's opinion is called an "anticipation" of Moore's in the extract above

¹⁰⁵ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. 13

at (i). From what we have learnt from parts one and two of this thesis it would be safe to assume that the reason Cudworth's argument can be said to be an anticipation of Moore's is because the logical conclusion from Cudworth's argument is that 'good' must be indefinable. Cudworth argues that if terms like 'good' and 'evil' are not merely insignificant names then they cannot be arbitrary things made by the will without nature. (iv) Yet if we hold, like the inconsistent naturalists do, that 'good' is what it is by nature, then God would have a power above Him, governing His commands, and that power is nature. This would be a contradiction in the commonly held conception of the Christian God. It might be that the reason Prior thinks Cudworth is like Moore is that Prior thinks the identification of goodness with obedience to God's will (iv) (which Cudworth objects to) is very like the identification of goodness with some natural property (which Moore objects to). So their good arguments are similar, but not quite the same.

More evidence of this comes later in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* where Prior again claims Cudworth's arguments are an anticipation of Moore.

2. (v) The closest approach to an anticipation of Professor Moore that we have yet encountered is perhaps Cudworth's relegation to a parenthesis, as something which his opponents cannot have seriously meant to maintain, of the view that good and evil are 'mere names without signification, or names for nothing else but willed and commanded'. But Cudworth does not explain why he considers this possibility out of the question. Here and there, however, among those who came after Cudworth, there are to be found writers who do consider it worth while to explain why this possibility cannot be seriously entertained. (vi) The earliest of such explanations which I have been able to trace is that of Shaftesbury, who points out that 'whoever thinks there is a God, and pretends formally to believe that he is just and good, must suppose that there is independently such a thing as justice and injustice, pronounces that God is just, righteous, and true. (viii) If the mere will, decree, or law of God be said absolutely to constitute right or wrong, then are these latter words' – i.e. the 'pronouncement' that God is just, righteous, and true – 'of no significancy at all'. (ix) And the anticipation of Moore is made complete a little later by Hutcheson, who writes: 'To call the laws of the Supreme Deity good, or holy, or just, if all goodness, holiness and justice be constituted by laws, or by the will of a superior any way revealed, must be an insignificant tautology, amounting to no more than this, "That God wills what he wills"'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Ibid p. 95-96

Imagine that someone were to claim that one cannot believe both that God is the Supreme Deity, and that there are such independent notions of truth, justice, righteousness, etcetera. It is sufficient to say simply that Prior uses this quote to better explain Cudworth's position. At (vii) we see Cudworth's opinion expressed; this position is that it would not be a significant position to hold that God is just, righteous, and true because if it is his will or decree that causes something to be just, right, and true then those notions would not exist independently of His arbitrary will. If one subscribes to this position then one would have to resign themselves to the fact that the only reason anything would be good or bad, right or wrong, is because God wills it to be so. At (v) and (ix) Prior talks of an anticipation of Moore, and this is related to the previous point. If it is God's will or decree that causes things to be called good, or right, then things do *not* have an eternal or immutable nature. And this amounts to the *insignificant* tautology that God wills what he wills. It amounts to this because God would not command acts to be done, or profess characters to be good or bad, on the basis of the acts' and characters' natures being good or bad – he would simply be willing whatever he wills.

From the two passages examined so far we can see Prior asserted that although Cudworth's argument was not quite the same as Moore's he did defend his opinion by the same bad argument. Prior claims that Cudworth's point is that one cannot hold *both* that God is the source of all goodness and righteousness *and* that things are by nature good and righteous because this leads to a tautology. And this, according to Prior, is an anticipation of Moore's position that 'good' is undefinable. The question still remains of how Cudworth's position is supposed to constitute an anticipation of Moore, so we must look further. Prior tells us it is an anticipation, but we want to know precisely *how* it is an anticipation. The following passage expresses an extension of the previous points regarding divine command at (v-ix). We met with the first part of the extract (x) in part two and it is necessary to repeat it in order to give context to the second part starting at (xi), and to show how the whole relates to Cudworth.

3. (x) The phrase 'good by nature' has also caused confusion through the conflict between tendencies to identify it, and tendencies not to identify it, with 'good by definition'. I think this double use of 'good by nature' – to mean 'good by definition', and at the same time

something more than this – is an instance of the fallacy which Dr. Popper calls ‘essentialism’. Here the chief offenders have not been Hobbes and his followers, but Cudworth and his. (xi) And through this ambiguity many quite unimpeachably non-naturalistic writers have fallen into the illusion of deducing ethical propositions from non-ethical ones, the indispensable ethical premiss, when attention is drawn to it, being passed off as ‘only a definition’. (xii) The whole process is sometimes called showing the ‘foundations’ in nature of our various duties. It might begin with a demonstration of God’s existence, followed by a proof that His purpose in making us was that our reason should govern our instincts; and from this it is concluded that our reason *ought* to govern our instincts. (xiii) The conclusion plainly cannot be drawn unless it is also granted that we ‘ought’ to accomplish God’s purposes for us; but this premiss is thought to be such a ‘little one’ as to be hardly worth mentioning; for ‘after all, it is of the very nature of our relation to our Maker that we ought to obey Him – to say that we ought to obey Him is just to say that He *is* our Maker’. (xiv) But either this statement is significant or not. If we mean by calling God our Maker not only that He has made us but that we ought to obey Him, then that we ought to obey our Maker, i.e. that we ought to obey a Being whom we ought to obey, is plainly true, but hardly to the purpose. (xv) If we mean that any Being who stands to us in the *other* relations in which God stands to us, cannot but also be One whom we ought to obey, then this is more than a definition, and is a premiss that requires to be set down; and either its ‘foundation’ must be shown, or it must be admitted that not all duties can be provided with a ‘foundation’.¹⁰⁷

The part of this extract beginning at (x) refers to our tendency either to identify things or not to identify things that we believe are good (or bad), by virtue of their natures, with them (therefore) being good (or bad) by definition. More simply, we are confusing an object’s nature with a definition. In other words, when we speak of an act being by nature good or bad we often assume that it is then good or bad by definition. Take the term ‘murder,’ most would agree that to carry out the act of murder would be bad, but it is questionable as to whether the term ‘murder’ is also *by definition* bad. Again most would probably agree that it is, however, if we take the commonly held definition of ‘murder,’ which is, the act of killing another human being with intent or premeditation, and apply it to an ethical dilemma, some might say that ‘murder’ might sometimes be acceptable and might produce the best result for those involved. Consider the textbook example of a school filled with young children being held by armed gunmen, whose only demand is that you, the negotiator, murder a person the gunmen bear a grudge

¹⁰⁷ Ibid p. 27-28

against. If you do not obey the command, the gunmen promise they will kill all of the children; if you do as they request, all will be set free. In this situation committing the act of murder seems like the best choice considering the possible consequences. If murder was by definition bad, could it really produce good results?¹⁰⁸ This may be the confusion Prior speaks of, whether or not it is possible to have an act such as ‘murder’ be by its essential nature bad and also be identified by definition as bad when in certain circumstances it would be considered good. Prior might call this a case of Popper’s fallacy of essentialism, which is that we cannot have knowledge of things by expressing, through definitions, what we come to believe through intuitions, as this does not constitute true knowledge of the nature of things.¹⁰⁹ And of this, Prior claims Cudworth and his followers are guilty.

Following on from (x) Prior continues to accuse unnamed writers of making even more mistakes. At (xi) he accuses said unnamed writers of falling into the “illusion” of deducing ethical propositions from non-ethical ones and giving the excuse that the indispensable ethical premise is ‘only a definition.’ While written in plain English this sentence (xi) is difficult to understand. One can only assume that the ‘indispensable ethical premiss’ Prior refers to is the ethical premise being deduced from the non-ethical one. Consider the following argument:

- (a) We are required to partake in jury service if called
- Therefore
- (b) We ought to partake in jury service if called

The first premise (a) is a non-ethical premise, while (b) must be the indispensable ethical premise, which would be passed off as a definition if attention were called to it. In other words, if non-naturalists claim we have an obligation to perform jury service, perhaps because the law says so, they could strengthen their claim by asserting also that it is in the very definition of jury service that it is something one ought to perform if called. Prior calls this finding the “foundations in nature of our various duties” at (xii), and here we get back to Cudworth’s divine command dilemma. Prior says that to find the foundations of our duties one might “begin with a demonstration of God’s existence,

¹⁰⁸ In many cases we simply say that such killings are not really ‘murder’ – i.e. we change the definition.

¹⁰⁹ The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy, p. 179

followed by a proof that His purpose in making us was that our reason should govern our instincts” this demonstration and proof would be considered to be using non-ethical statements, so to conclude that our reason *ought* to govern our instincts would, in Prior’s opinion, be a mistake.

At (xiii) Prior continues his discussion of drawing ethical conclusions from non-ethical propositions by claiming that the only way one could conclude that our reason ought to govern our instincts would be to prove “that we ‘ought’ to accomplish God’s purpose for us.” However, this lands us back with the problem of triviality because to say that we ought to obey God, our Maker, is simply to say that He is our Maker, as it would be within the concept of a God/Maker that we ought to obey Him. Thus, we must question whether to consider the statement ‘One ought to obey their maker’ significant or not. Prior discusses this at (xiv) suggesting that if we mean by calling God our Maker “that we ought to obey a Being whom we ought to obey” this would be true but it tells us nothing, and seems trivial to state. However, if as (xv) suggests we mean that we ought to obey a Being who stands in different relations to us then we would require a foundation for this since it would constitute *more* than a definition. This means that, where the term ‘God’ is concerned it is taken for granted, or contained within the very definition, that He ought to be obeyed, this would not be so where another being is concerned. Thus it would need to be set out, and if a foundation could not be shown then it would have to be “admitted that not all duties can be provided with a foundation.”

Directly following the previous passage is additional information that shows how Prior connects the divine command problem with the naturalistic fallacy and with Cudworth. This is perhaps the most explicit link we have so far encountered:

4. (xvi) (This confusion of a tautology with a significant proposition, resulting from the identification of a significant proposition with a definition, is like the confusion which Professor Moore calls the ‘naturalistic fallacy’; but it is not quite the same, as the tautologies in question arise, not from a naturalistic definition of ‘good’, but from a non-naturalistic definition of what is said to *be* good. (xvii) ‘Obedient to God’ is not said to be ‘the very meaning of the word “good”’; but ‘having a duty to obey God’ is said to be part of what it ‘means’ to be His creature.)

(xix) This is a simplified general scheme rather than an accurate reproduction of the views of any particular writer. (It is based on personal experience of controversy with Thomists more than on anything else.) But there is more than a hint of it in the endless irrelevancies about the laws of identity and contradiction in which Cudworth indulges when he is trying to prove that there must be some things which are good, not because anyone has commanded them, but simply because 'they are what they are'. (xx) What Cudworth undoubtedly means to maintain is that there are certain qualities – generosity, loyalty, &c. – of which we can say that whatever acts possess them are thereby determined as possessing another quality, 'goodness'. But this is neither identical with nor deducible from the fact that whatever is good is good.¹¹⁰

In the passage marked 3. above, we saw how Prior explained that the problem of believing both that God is the source of 'goodness' and that divine commands are 'good' leads to believing a tautology. The reason it leads to a tautology is because it would not be a *significant* statement to say that God is our Maker and that we ought to obey Him, since it would be contained within the definition of God – that He made us and we ought to obey Him. At (xvi) in the passage above Prior asserts that confusing a tautology, like the one just pointed out, with a significant proposition is like Moore's naturalistic fallacy, but not quite the same. For one to fall into the 'naturalistic' fallacy, one would be guilty of attempting to give a definition of 'good' using naturalistic terms. However, what we had in the third passage was non-naturalistic, thus not a true case of Moore's naturalistic fallacy.

What Prior is getting at in line (xvii) is for those who attempt to find the foundations of our duties in nature by way of a demonstration of God's existence, the phrase 'Obedient to God' is not taken as the meaning of 'good.' For those who do try and prove the foundations of duties through divine command, having a duty to obey God is what it *means* to have been made by Him. And this again is a case of the tautology discussed above, because if God is our Maker, and what it means to be creature of God is to obey Him, then to say 'One ought to obey God's will' would amount to nothing but a truism. Prior accuses Cudworth (xix) of having more than a hint of the 'general scheme' in the "endless irrelevancies about the laws of identity and contradiction in which Cudworth indulges," and it would have been good to have some surer guidance here, but Prior does not offer that. Moreover, in the last part of the passage (xx) he suggests that what

¹¹⁰ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. 28

Cudworth 'undoubtedly' meant was that acts said to be generous or loyal etcetera must also be said to be good, or possess the quality 'goodness.' Again without more direction from Prior it is difficult to see just what he was getting at here.

However, from our study of Cudworth in part two of this thesis, we know that Cudworth certainly was not focussed on this point. It must be remembered that Cudworth's position was that God wills what is good, and that notions like 'good,' 'evil,' 'justice,' and 'injustice' are moral absolutes, unchangeable by God. Cudworth's quest was to prove this position; it was not to prove that 'good' is indefinable, so whether or not he meant to maintain that certain acts possess 'goodness' would have been relevant only so far as it was concerned with the eternal and immutable nature of morality and divine command. So after examining the four passages above we are still no closer to gaining hard evidence from Prior as to why we should believe that Moore and Cudworth were guilty of arguing badly in the same way. It should be becoming more apparent, even through just the lack of supporting evidence, that Prior has been somewhat confused in his arguments regarding Moore and Cudworth and linking them with the naturalistic fallacy, or something like it.

The next two passages that will be presented are those referring to fallacies. Their inclusion is for the purpose of showing that Prior really did argue that many writers were guilty of fallacies, and yet again makes the claim without providing the necessary evidence to support it. Passage 5. seems to constitute Prior's feelings regarding Moore and the naturalistic fallacy, and passage 6. as we will see shows exactly what Prior thinks he has achieved in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*.

5. (xxi) We shall find in our final study that the special argument which has come to be associated with the name of Professor Moore has been used by quite a number of writers before him; but the argument that no ethical conclusion can be inferred from entirely non-ethical premisses is both older and more common. It is, I think, easier for most people to follow; and it compendiously refutes a greater variety of fallacies, including the one that Professor Moore refutes as a special case. (xxii) For if it is impossible to deduce an ethical proposition from any entirely non-ethical premiss or set of premisses, then it is impossible to deduce one from a definition, since a definition, if it is properly to be called a proposition at all, is not one about obligations, but one about the meaning of words. (xxiii) (At the same time, definitions of 'obligation' and other moral terms look as if they

are about obligations, and as if significant propositions about obligations might be deducible from them, and Professor Moore's argument is often necessary as a supplementary measure to destroy this illusion.)¹¹¹

The "final study" to which Prior refers at line (xxi) is titled 'The Naturalistic Fallacy: The History of its Refutation,' where he looks briefly at many writers such as seventeenth century John Locke and ^{the} Earl of Shaftesbury, eighteenth century Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Richard Price, to nineteenth century Archbishop Whately, Henry Sidgwick, Thomas Hill Green, and Herbert Spencer. He talks briefly of Moore and very little of Cudworth in this part so is not particularly relevant for present purposes. I think more to the point is the line starting at (xxii): Prior truly believed that it is impossible to deduce ethical propositions from entirely non-ethical premises and on this basis believes also that one cannot deduce ethical claims from definitions. Furthermore, we see at (xxiii) that Prior claims that definitions of the term 'obligation' and other moral terms such as 'good' and perhaps 'ought' look as if they are about obligations, and look as if significant propositions about such obligations can be deduced from them, and in these cases Moore's argument of committing the naturalistic fallacy is needed to thwart this. As we can see, Prior considers deducing ethical propositions from non-ethical premises an 'illusion' and Moore's argument capable of destroying this illusion, however he does not give more to explain this, thus leaving it unconvincing.

The last passage I will analyse, which is found at the beginning of Prior's last study, gives the most important piece of evidence to support my case that there is a confusion in Prior's arguments regarding the naturalistic fallacy and in his treatment of Moore and Cudworth.

6. (xxiv) We have seen that the claim to infer significant ethical propositions from definitions of ethical terms, which appears to constitute the essence of what Professor Moore calls the naturalistic fallacy, is a special case of a more general fallacious claim, namely, the claim to deduce ethical propositions from ones which are admitted to be non-ethical. (xxv) We have considered some of the forms in which this claim has been historically put forward, and some of the ways in which it has been historically refuted. (xxvi) We have also considered attempts to give ethics a 'foundation' by misleading

¹¹¹ Ibid p. 24

extensions of the concept of 'truth', and the ways in which the fallacies involved in such attempt have been or may be exposed.¹¹²

In the last two lines (xxv) and (xxvi) Prior tells us exactly what he believed he had accomplished through the studies in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* but the most important line is the first (xxiv). We saw in the first part of this thesis that Moore accused those who attempt to give definitions of ethical terms (which are indefinable) of committing the naturalistic fallacy. Prior admits in the first line of the quote above that inferring significant ethical claims from definitions of ethical propositions is a special case of the fallacy of deducing ethical propositions from non-ethical premises. This is such an important line because it is evidence of a subtle, but major, shift by Prior. Throughout *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* Prior has given many examples of those he believed were guilty of fallacious reasoning. Those he mentioned, such as Hume, Bentham, and even Moore and Cudworth, were accused specifically of committing the naturalistic fallacy, or something "not unlike it." The only explanation Prior gives for what the naturalistic fallacy is, and how it works, is within his discussion of Moore. So we can only assume, as the evidence has suggested, that Prior's view of the naturalistic fallacy, over the course of eight out of the nine studies in the book, was closely linked with Moore's account. But now, in the last study, we find that he has changed his view slightly (but with extreme results), so that what he had considered to be the naturalistic fallacy is actually something else.

What he is essentially saying in the first line is that deducing *ethical propositions* from *non-ethical premises* is the problem. This is what we all ought to avoid doing. This subtle shift must have arisen because after considering the different theories of so many philosophers Prior realised that they were not all making the same mistake, and he could not accuse most of them, if any of them, of committing the naturalistic fallacy. He did attempt to get away from this trouble by accusing some of them, like Moore, of committing a fallacy "not unlike" the naturalistic fallacy, but until looking at the quote above it has been difficult to figure out what sort of fallacy Prior had in mind when he used the phrase "not unlike" the naturalistic fallacy. It is inferred in the first line that the fallacy he was referring to is the 'fallacy' of attempting to deduce ethical

¹¹² Ibid p. 95

propositions from non-ethical premises, something he told us, throughout the book, he believed to be not just a mistake, but impossible.

The quote above (6.) is the strongest evidence we have seen to support my case that Prior was mistaken about the naturalistic fallacy and in his accusations against Moore and Cudworth (and by extension many of the others he discussed) because in his later article 'The Autonomy of Ethics' in *Papers in Logic and Ethics* he states:

It has been said – in fact, I have said it quite emphatically myself – that it is impossible to deduce ethical conclusions from non-ethical premisses. This now seems to me a mistake...¹¹³

This quote counters Prior's suggestion in the extract (6.) above. If the naturalistic fallacy is, as Prior claimed, a special case of the 'fallacy' of deducing ethical propositions from non-ethical premises, and if that 'fallacy' is, as Prior later states, not actually a mistake, then it stands to reason that Prior has been guilty of a confusion, which runs throughout *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*. That confusion is the claim that so many philosophers (and perhaps others) have committed the naturalistic fallacy, or something not unlike it.

¹¹³ Prior, *Papers in Logic and Ethics*, p. 88

Conclusion

Arthur Prior made a significant contribution to philosophy through the study of Logic. He tells us at the beginning of *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* he has “attempted here to consider the issue purely as a logician, and to suggest to both sides how their positions may be freed from logical faults.” However, this little book is not strictly a study of Logic, and Prior has made this obvious in the title. The *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* is a historical account of a fallacy – namely the naturalistic fallacy – which Prior believes has been committed and requires exposure in every age. The exposure of this fallacy Prior says is “like housekeeping, or lawnmowing, or shaving.” As we saw in part three of this thesis, he also has this to say in regard to fallacious reasoning:

THE tendency to fall into fallacious modes of reasoning is rather like an epidemic that breaks out during a war. It strikes one side first, giving a temporary advantage to the other; but it has a way of drifting across the line of battle and infecting those who formerly had the satisfaction of being free from it.¹¹⁴

But while we cannot call this book a study in Logic, we also cannot strictly call it a study of the naturalistic fallacy either, since Prior uses the cunning ploy of accusing many of committing something “not unlike it.” So what exactly is this book about? It is difficult to establish what it was that Prior thought he was contributing with this study. And the biggest problem is that he seems to have confused Ethics with Logic.

Prior tells us on page one that the issue he would examine is that “We all sometimes describe conduct and character...as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, or as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’” and those who do so thinking there is nothing out of the ordinary make the mistake of thinking these ethical predicates simply express feelings or refer to ‘natural’ characteristics. He made sure to inform us on page one, also, that it is an “illusion” to think that “purely

¹¹⁴ Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. 26

logical considerations can settle it.” On the next page he mentioned Aristotle’s divide (which I looked at in section three of this thesis). The point of this was to explain that there are three subjects of enquiry, ‘natural,’ ‘ethical,’ and ‘logical,’ and that one could not expect to solve problems found within any one of these subjects by employing tools only from another subject. This all sounds perfectly reasonable, however, the contradiction should be obvious. Prior himself is coming at a problem found in Ethics in a purely logical fashion.

Prior specifically claims to be writing as a logician not as an ethics specialist. He makes it his business to examine the logical structure of certain traditional arguments independently of their (substantive) ethical content. As this thesis has shown there appear to be two different sorts of arguments that he was concentrating on.

1. The argument of a naturalist who says that ‘good’ =_{df} X

Prior argues against such naturalists and there is a strong assumption in a lot of the literature that naturalists are guilty of a fallacy because they believe both that X and Y are unique and yet X =_{df} Y. But there are two points to consider about this:

- The X =_{df} Y and X ≠_{df} Y mistake may not be something that naturalists do make because naturalists have the option – an option given by Prior – of saying that they are not making that mistake because they are simply doing Hedonics or Biological Strategy or whatever they choose to call it.
- If there is a problem of philosophers traditionally arguing X =_{df} Y and X ≠_{df} Y then it may very well be a fallacy but is certainly not specific to Ethics.

2. Prior thinks there is a fallacy committed by non-naturalists (such as Moore) who argue:

Good cannot be defined in terms of what it is not (because everything is what it is and not another thing)

Therefore,

Good cannot be defined

Prior thinks that naturalists commit (1) and that non-naturalists, such as Moore, commit (2). Even if we consider that both (1) and (2) are fallacies, it is important to recognise that they are independent of Ethics. Exposing them does not tell us whether the naturalists or the non-naturalists are right. And Prior is clear in the early pages of his book that nothing he says can answer that particular debate because that is a debate within Ethics, and he is a logician.

Throughout this thesis it should have become clear that there is something going on in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* that does not sit quite right. Prior made a point of discussing G. E. Moore and Ralph Cudworth more so than many of the others he made mention of, and in those discussions treated them as making the same mistake while admitting that their arguments were actually very different. Due to Prior's lack of lucidity in his book it was necessary for me to give detailed textual analyses of both Moore's *Principia Ethica* and Cudworth's *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* in order to provide a foundation upon which we could then examine Prior's own arguments. It was found that Moore and Cudworth were indeed arguing about different things in different ways, but that they both seemed to rest on tautologies, and it was suggested that this may have been the reason Prior considered them to have argued badly in the same way. However, Prior not only accused them of arguing badly he claimed that arguing in the way that they did would lead to fallacious reasoning. But again there was a lack of evidence from Prior, which meant it was necessary for me to give a detailed account, in part three, of the different sorts of fallacies involved in Prior's accusations. In this part it was discovered that there was a scholarly debate about whether or not the so-called naturalistic fallacy is really a fallacy and this supported my claim that there is a confusion in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*.

After this critical discovery it was imperative that we look at just what it was Prior was saying in his book, so in part four I gave a very close textual analysis of *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* which further illustrated the fact that Prior seemed to be confused on some points particularly in the way that he connected the arguments of Moore and Cudworth. It became especially evident in this part that Prior really did lack evidence. He seemed to think that the truth of his claims was entirely obvious. However, it was shown throughout my study that an awful lot more needed to be said in order to be able to fully understand not only Prior's arguments but also those of Moore and Cudworth;

and in order to be able to understand the nature of the issues that were at hand. As I said above Prior contributed greatly to the study of Logic, but here he was confusing an ethical issue with something that could be solved through purely logical considerations, something he himself made clear was a mistake. After analysing and evaluating the difficult texts it has been determined that Prior has not provided enough evidence in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* to prove that naturalists, non-naturalists, or any other ethicists, have been (or will be) guilty of committing the naturalistic fallacy, or something not unlike it.

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